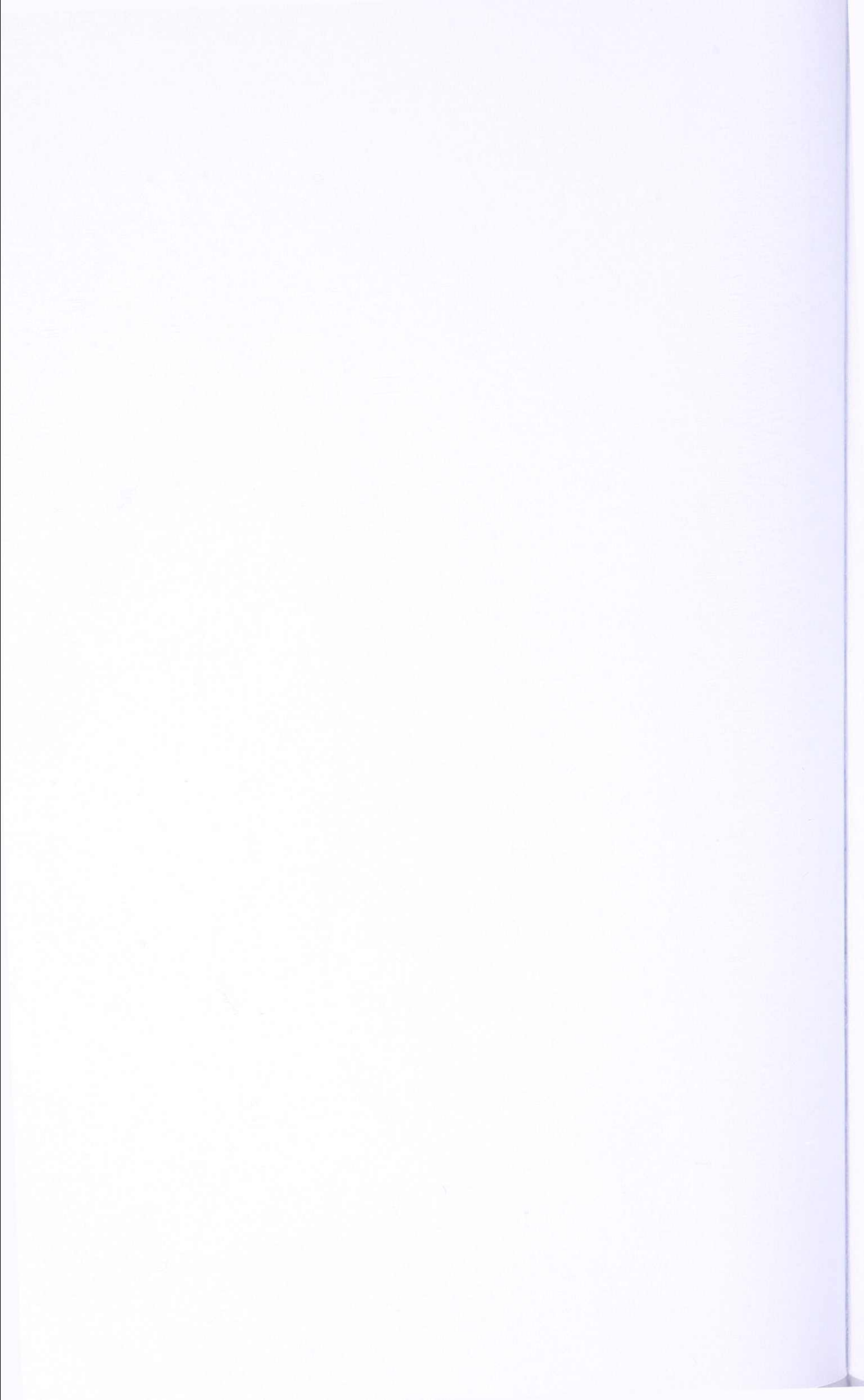
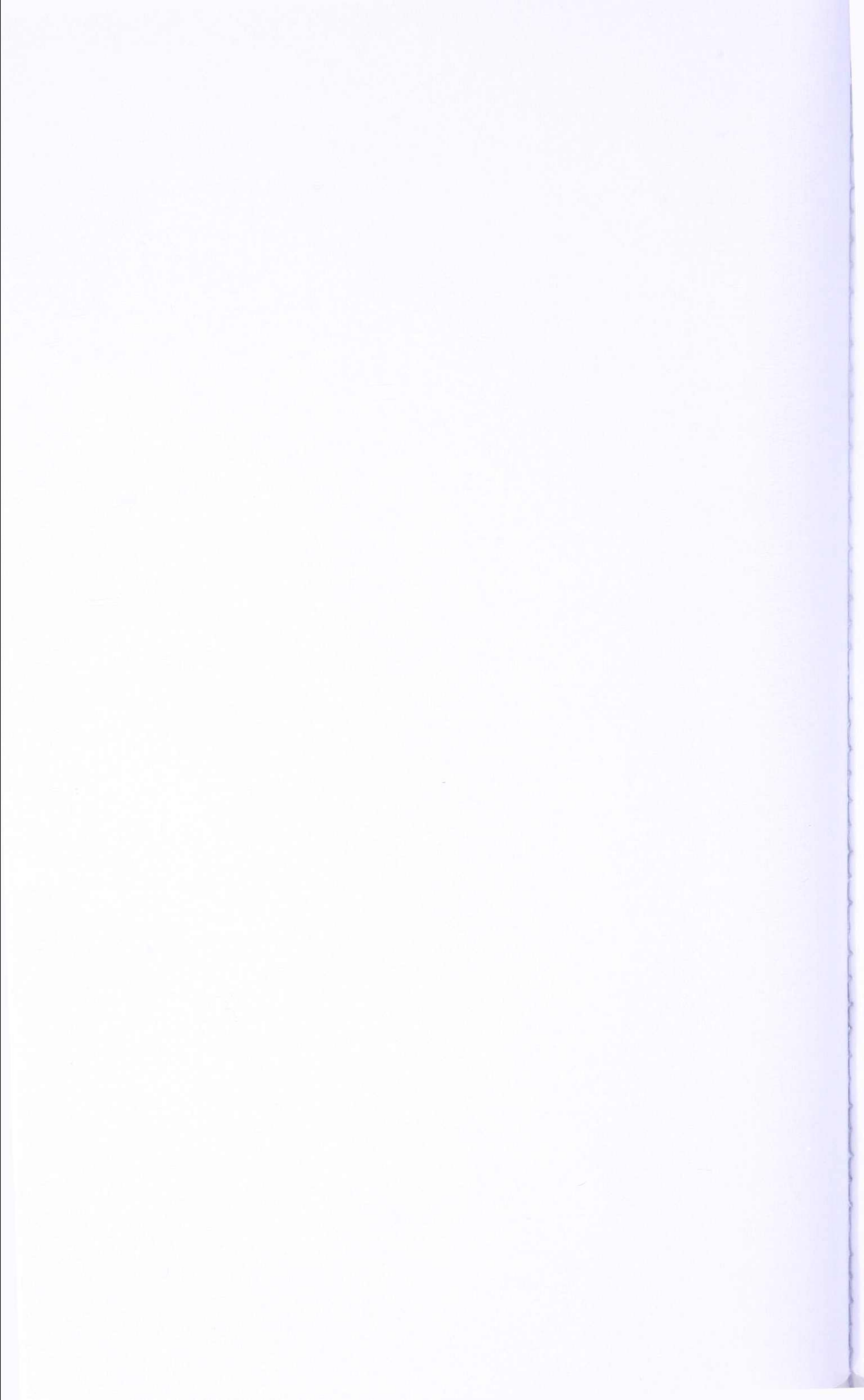


arden 2012



volume xiv





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2012

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Prize for Non-Fiction

A Taste of Something Slowly Over Time
by lito

Prize for Art

Küss Mich
by Autumn James

On the cover: *Chaotic Seas* by Amber Carlisle

Editor's Note

Assembling the Arden has been a humbling experience. This year the submissions bowed my desk under their weight. While their volume impressed me, the quality of the work really knocked me over. Pieces from every corner of campus reflected a growing artistry, as a spirit of creativity has roared to life at Columbus State University.

I am most pleased by a distinctly Southern voice emerging from our writers. For too long I have noticed an avoidance, as though to write with a Southern accent were a bad habit. Now we have a generation of authors and poets embracing and revitalizing an important and culturally distinct sub-genre from a proud literary tradition. Our writers have approached their work with unique voices, with perspectives not always adoring, but starkly truthful.

Our artists have put forth a body of work that is full of provocation and self-reflection. The range of emotion in the pieces submitted was breathtaking, which made the process of selection extraordinarily difficult. I was grateful to have such knowledgeable editors to lead the way. We were all awed by the variety of media, as pressboards, encaustics, and salt doughs muscled their way into the lineup.

I had little idea what to expect when I signed on last spring. The process of last year's Arden was exciting, but I was fortunate to be working for a pro. This year I thought it was all up to me. How wrong I was, and how lucky I was to have such a gifted and driven staff. From their diligence in soliciting for their various departments, to their enthusiasm for the editing and revision process, to impassioned late-night construction sessions, they have raised the bar with their dedication. Their work is evident in these pages, and I am unspeakably grateful. They kept it exciting and kept me on my toes with constant questions and badgering about deadlines and guidelines. They hounded me relentlessly for a release date to get their hands on this book.

Now I am pleased to present Arden 2012. I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed making it.

Marshall S. Callaway
Editor in Chief



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Thai Food & God

across the street from the thai restaurant

where we ate
rests an old trinity episcopal church.
he pointed it out once we finished

eating. the steeple is grabbing for the
feathers

that slip off the birds riding
updrafts. entangled in them is a hint
of glory, something the steeple
couldn't reach. the stain glass
windows
purify the sunlight as it basks the pews
in something glorious. the doors call out to
the people walking, to the drunks
stumbling,
the hobos on bicycles,
the gays in bars, men with briefcases
and a young girl in a dress made of flowers.

he hasn't been there in awhile,
but once thought of being a
priest and leading the
benediction
and wrapping himself in
a soft cassock and wearing a mitre.

but the tempting
aroma of a tainted
liberation led him
to a bar.

"there's a rift in the anglican
community these days
anyway."

i didn't have
much to say just of
my upbringing
and the god i used
to believe. and how i
should have gotten a
meal with less curry.

he told me of the polytheistic
jews. of that
mountain and stone.
how hell is nothing but a
burning bin of trash
on the outskirts of town
and heaven is in the life you lead,
or something like that.
i tried to stop listening.

the thai food from the dinner we ate began
to twist and churn in my stomach.

and i felt the splinter of wood,
two thousand years old.

he said john of patmos ate shrooms,
that jesu was a man of
enlightenment and more would come.
that when he died
his body rotted beneath the linen
cradling his perfume heavy flesh.

and the earth took back dust given away.
i spent that night leaning over a toilet.

Catfish

The air was hot and humid, leaving skin sticky with a sweat that was impossible to shake. Martin sat on the front porch watching his son dig in the ground. Jack's dark hair clung to his sweaty face adding to the grime. His bright blue eyes stared at the spoon digging away at the earth one scoop at a time. Jack's cat, Boots, rolled in the dirt beside him soaking up the coolness of the fresh soil. His dirty fur made him look brown instead of white.

"When we gonna fix the air, Dad?"

"Soon as I get the money. You know business is slow during the summer. Ain't no huntin' season to keep us busy."

The trailer sat on a small lot off of a long and winding dirt road. Although there were plenty of woods on the outskirts of the yard, the tin roof scorched in the summer heat, unaided by the shade of a single tree.

"What does hunters do in the summer, Dad?"

"Well, I reckon most of 'em fish."

Martin hadn't bothered to teach his son the art of fishing. The boy was too restless, his hands always busy with one thing or another. He fiddled with keys, took batteries out of remotes, and the pockets of his blue jeans were always filled with rocks, twigs and the occasional dead unfortunate critter caught in the yard. Jack couldn't sit in church for an hour, much less sit on a boat for half a day.

"How come we ain't never been fishin dad?"

"You wanna go?" Martin said, hoping his son had finally reached an age to share a common interest, one other than BB guns and Tonka trucks.

"Yeah! Do we get to eat 'em?"

Martin promised a fishing trip. No hunting season meant slow business for a taxidermist, but the slow summer months meant more time with his son. The boy was growing up too fast. Playing the role of both parents was tough but manageable. His yard no longer had much grass from being dug up with spoons for two summers now. The house wasn't clean. Inside, matchbox cars and green army men littered the floor. The mess wasn't all because of Jack though. Every morning, last night's dinner dishes stayed stacked in the sink, sticky with dried ketchup. Fish stick boxes or chicken nugget bags lingered on the counter for ants to discover.

The lack of business had its disadvantages too. For some time, the air conditioner had been broken. The money from the winter months was budgeted to stretch throughout the entire year. There was money for food, for power, and even a little to replace the holey shoes of a six year old. But there wasn't much room for home repairs. The windows in the trailer stayed open, but most of the day was spent outside where a cool breeze could soften the heat.

Martin grew anxious to get a line in the water, but a lot had to be done to get ready for the afternoon fishing trip. Poles had to be relined, lures restrung, and Jack had to learn how to throw a bait caster. Jack stayed digging in the yard

while Martin headed to the shed out back. The shed was full of old fishing stuff that gathered dust on shelves. They reminded Martin of Grandpa Joe catching the biggest bass he'd ever seen. He remembered getting a spinner bait hook lodged in his finger, and Grandpa Joe's white beard stained with tobacco as he taught him how to hold his mouth while fishing to catch more. Martin grinned as he recalled the grin on Grandpa's face as the old fluke-tailed worm slapped the water before sinking to the bottom, and the wink he always gave while pulling the fish into the boat as if to say 'That, boy, is how it's done.' Martin was eager to share all of these memories on the bank of Mill Pond and make new ones with Jack.

Lures of every kind filled the sections of Martin's worn tackle box—old ones handed down from Grandpa Joe, and a few newer ones Martin had from a life before fatherhood when he had more time for fishing. Three boxes labeled 'fish' were shoved against the far wall and numerous bait casters hung on rusted nails. Martin loved to fish with bait casters. There was something about the way they made any kind of lure sail through the air effortlessly, making it easy to place a popper underneath the shadow of a hanging cypress. But throwing one right was easier said than done. If it was thrown too hard, the line backlashed turning the reel into a messy array. If it wasn't thrown hard enough, the lure went straight up into the air not even making it into the water. It required practice – and lots of patience.

Martin grabbed one of the poles and a five gallon bucket, heading back to the front yard. Jack needed to learn to cast.

"Alright, Jack. I've got a fishin' pole for you to practice with. I'm gonna put this bucket a little way from you and you gotta try to ring it with the spinner, okay?"

Jack nodded as he stood up, wiping the dirt from his hands onto the seat of his pants.

"You gotta bring it back like this and push down on this button. Now remember to keep your thumb on the line like this, so it don't get tangled when you throw. And when you bring it forward, give the line some slack and just aim."

"What if it gets tangled, Dad?"

"Well then we'll just have to get it *untangled*."

Jack stood close to the bucket, reared back with the pole and tossed. The spinner bait landed in front of him and the line wound around itself. He huffed as Martin took the pole, pulling the line from the reel. Boots got up from his dirt hole and sauntered over to Jack. He rubbed his body on the boy's legs and purred loudly. Pleased with this self-petting method, the cat plopped down on the ground and stretched his paws out to bask in the sun. Jack took the pole back with a look of determination on his face. Martin

grinned as he recognized the similarities in their facial expressions. Jack's chin was sharp just like his dad's. His cheeks were round and full, a characteristic he would surely outgrow. Jack threw again. This time, the bait sailed through the air and the line stayed kink free. He reeled the line back in with a small smirk on his face.

"It was closer, huh Dad? And the line didn't even get messed up," Jack exclaimed.

"Very good. Now just keep practicing. You're gonna need to be good at it for when we go fishin' in a little bit. You wanna catch lots right? We'll have a fish fry for dinner if we do. And I'll even show you how to clean them fish."

Martin walked to the porch step, keeping a keen eye on his son. The lure came closer and closer to the bucket with each throw. The boy was a natural. After about twenty tries, Jack finally rang the bucket. His smile was big; Martin could almost count all his teeth. As Jack reeled the line back in, the spinner flopped from the bucket and hit the ground with a jingle. Boots looked up from his nap eying the lure suspiciously. His eyes became wide and dark with anticipation. The lure was almost back to Jack's feet when the cat went into a stalking pose, wiggling his butt in the air. Just before Boots made his attack, Jack picked up on the line snatching the lure into the air. He giggled as he realized the game Boots was playing. Jack tossed the lure and rang the bucket again.

As the sun rose high in the sky, Martin returned into the muggy house to fix lunch—grilled cheese toasted an even golden brown on both sides. The excitement of the fishing trip left him feeling generous and Martin added an extra piece of cheese to the sandwich to ensure an extra gooey texture. Once both the sandwiches were done, Martin called Jack in to eat. With a full mouth, Jack began firing questions.

"What's the fish gonna look like, Dad? How big can those fishes get? Are there different kinds of fish? Can I use the same spinner as the one I'm throwin' in the yard? What's the biggest, fattest fish you ever caught in all your life, Dad? If I hit the bucket with that ole spinner does that mean I'll catch a fish? How come you know so much about fishin', Dad?"

Martin didn't have time to answer one question without another spewing out of Jack's mouth. Jack went outside right after lunch to continue practicing with the bait caster. The screen door slowly closed, allowing Boots to slip back out at Jack's heels.

Jack cast the line until each throw was perfect. He slung the rod, and the lure sailed into the bucket. He reeled the line in and the spinner bait rang as the blades snagged on the grass. Boots looked up, alerted by the noise. When the lure was within a couple feet of Jack, he sprang up from the ground and ran toward the bait. Jack reeled in quicker but Boots was too fast. With one pounce, the cat caught the lure in his mouth and took off running in the opposite direction.

"No Boots, drop it! Bad cat!" Jack yelled.

As the cat held tight to the lure, Jack jerked the pole. A howling scream pierced the air, and the cat ran away faster. Jack panicked.

"Dad! Boots has the spinner!"

Martin threw open the screen door, rushing outside towards his son's cries. Boots ran as fast as he could, flipping and turning all along the way. The faster Boots ran, the harder it was for Jack to hold on to the pole. Boots screamed louder as Jack tried to reel in the line.

"Jack, let go of the rod son! It hurts him more when you reel."

Jack let go, but Boots kept running. He flopped and twisted, trying to get away from the lure stuck in his mouth. Boots ran towards the back yard, dragging the rod with him. As he turned the corner of the trailer, the rod became caught against the side of the house.

Martin hurried towards the end of the line with Jack close behind him. One look at the bloody lure, and Jack started sobbing. The pole lay on the ground with most of the line out of the reel. Boots was nowhere to be seen. Martin placed a hand on Jack's shoulder as he looked down at his pleading eyes.

"Please, Daddy, we gotta help him. Boots didn't know it would hurt him. I didn't mean to, Dad. Honest," Jacked begged.

"I know buddy. Why don't you go inside and get an old towel. We'll find Boots."

As Jack ran towards the front door, Martin glanced around for signs of the cat. He crawled underneath the trailer, calling Boots' name. Spider webs hung from the floor joists, and crickets hopped across the moist sand. Boots was nowhere to be seen. As Jack returned with the towel, Martin crawled back out of the dark space.

"Where do you think he could be, Dad? Do you think Boots is okay? Do you think we'll find him?"

"We'll find him son. He can't be far."

Martin and Jack searched every inch of the yard with no luck. Their search led them into the woods surrounding their house. Jack stumbled over fallen logs desperately calling the cat's name.

"Boots! Here, kitty kitty!"

As the daylight faded it became hard to see much of anything. Martin sighed, almost ready to surrender the search.

"How would you like a new cat son? A small baby one that you can raise all of your own."

Jack began to cry.

"I don't want a new cat, Dad. I just want Boots back. Don't you think we'll find him?"

"I'm not sure Jack. It's getting dark and we're pretty far out in the woods. We'll look as long as it takes though. If you want Boots back, we'll

get Boots back. I just wish we had a flashlight or something, maybe we could see him better."

Jack reached deep into the pocket of his blue jeans and pulled out a hand full of rocks. He switched hands and retrieved a few paper clips and a small pocket flashlight. Martin grinned as he took the light and turned it on. As he cast the light across the leaves and fallen sticks, a set of glowing eyes caught his attention.

"Stay here Jack. I'm going to check something out."

Martin walked over to the animal, hoping silently that it wasn't a rabid raccoon or some other crazed creature.

"Boots?" Martin said, walking slowly towards the eyes.

As he got closer, a low howl came from the cat. Martin rushed over to him and fell to his knees. The cat's mouth was ripped open, leaving a gaping hole in the right side of his face. His fur was stained with blood clumped with the dirt from the front yard.

"Jack, bring me the towel. I found Boots, hurry!"

Jack ran over to his dad and tossed the towel in his direction. After wiping as much blood off of the cat's face and body as he could, Martin relaxed a little seeing that the bleeding had stopped. He wrapped him in the towel and picked him up.

The walk back to the house seemed a lot shorter than before. Once inside, Jack rushed around gathering blankets and towels to make a bed for his pet. Martin set Boots in the pile of cloth and went into the bathroom. He returned with a first aid kit and handed Jack a tube of Neosporin.

"Put a little on your finger and try to rub it on his mouth. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. Will this make it all better?"

"I hope so son. We'll just take care of him like I do you when you fall off your bike okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

Martin went into the kitchen to get some water for the cat. Boots would be okay, but he still probably needed to be taken to the vet. That just wasn't an option. Martin put together a bowl of cat food, soaking it in warm water to soften the crunchy bits. He returned to Jack and Boots to find Neosporin covering half of the cat's face and two sticky Band-Aids stuck to his fur. Martin sighed and shook his head softly.

Martin and Jack stayed by Boots most of the night to watch him. When the first rays of morning shone through the window, Martin awoke to find Jack wrapped in the blankets with Boots curled in a tight ball underneath the boy's arm. A low, rumbling purr filled the room as Martin left the house to gather his fishing poles.

your eyes in mine effervescent,

free

afterglow of grace unlooked-for;

the soft/sweet/wine/of/skin;

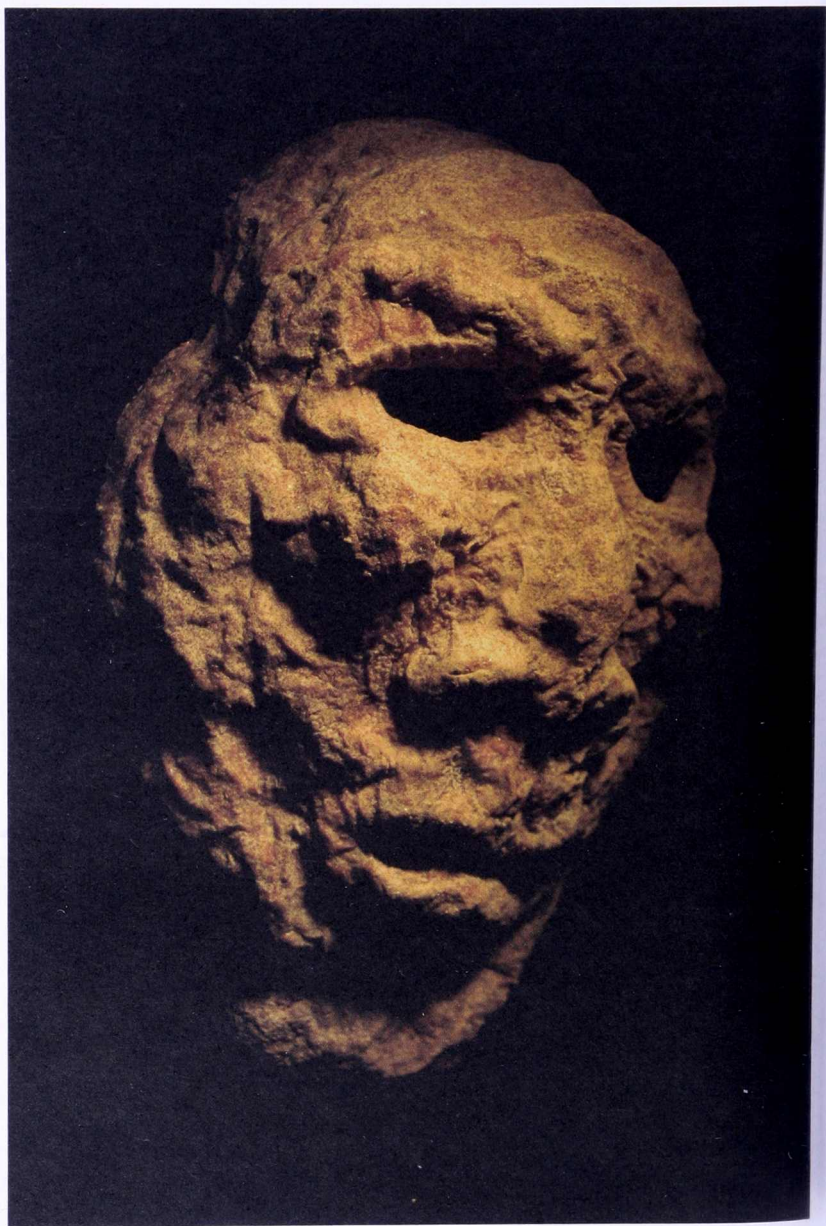
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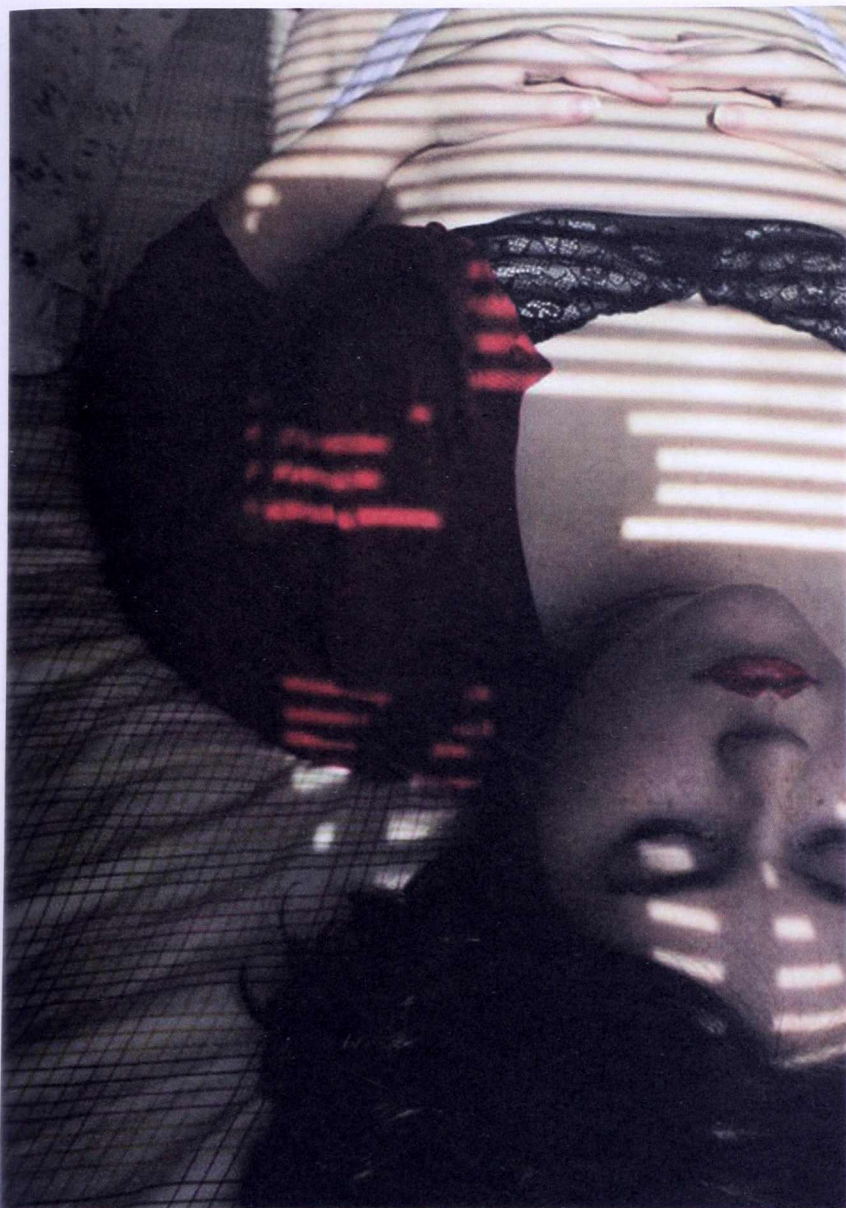
your

lips

with the steadfast solemnity of

sunrise







The color of her eyes
 did not match the ocean.
 — But still, her smile struck me.

As day faltered
 into night,
 we walked and talked
 of sirens, ships, and pirates.

Twilight faded into shadows
 and her eyes matched the ocean.
 And our laugh drifted out
 to sea
 — summoning waves of glittering dreams
 to carry us away.

With sand clinging to our feet
 and strong brine clogging our nostrils,
 we sat and watched the sea
 — our eyes filling with black-green water
 until it seemed we'd have to drown.

Long after our voices waned —
 the silence rose and fell.

A Taste of Something Slowly Over Time

Death is the only connection I have to Cuba. Apparently, my skin tells a different story than my mouth. Whenever someone asks where I'm from, Canada is not an acceptable answer because it always elicits: *no really, where are you from?*

I remember being very young, maybe four, my mother desperately crying over the death of an aunt whom I'd vaguely heard of. It is my first memory of fear, uncertain for my mother, unsure how she could be so visibly suffering over something that didn't exist for me. I was born in Canada, have played with Canadian kids my whole life, sung "O Canada" at movie theaters growing up. I wear tuques, play hockey, French is my second language, I use the washroom—not the bathroom—and I appreciate bad hair. But my mother was forced to leave an island in the Caribbean at nineteen and became Canadian slowly over time, infinitesimally approaching, but never reaching it. Stuck in the dead December winter, weeks before Christmas, my mother couldn't afford to go to her aunt's funeral. And I can't remember—most likely never knew—which of her mother's four sisters had died that day.

Over the years, my mother's hurt over Cuba became more apparent, but its loss never existed for me. When another Cuban family friend died—this time my mother's best friend, Martha, my godmother—it felt closer to home. Though she lived in Ottawa, she was like a second mother on holidays. Her influence on my early years was great; she loved music, dance, and in particular, food. She was famous for publishing a cookbook in Cuba, a national bestseller, stolen after 1961 since things like copyright no longer existed. She was the most incredible chef, and I still dream of the mango mousse she made for my graduation, the mango mousse that was decidedly not Cuban food, the mango mousse that wasn't at her funeral. It was an austere event, just a few friends, mostly Canadians that thought that Castro was a hero "standing up to the Americans." Utter bullshit, my mother used to explain, used to take the time to argue with them, show them the humanitarian implications of such a philosophy. After the death, my mother and her friend discovered that Martha was a spy, under investigation by the RCMP, and most of what she had recounted of her past was likely a lie. But not the cookbook; my mother's friend found the original proofs from the publisher in a shoebox. Yet, I still bought the English translation of the forgery from a Miami bookstore years later. The recipes are not how my mother remembers them, not how my mother made them, how her mother taught her to make them. She used to cook Cuban cuisine at least once a week growing up, but slowly over time this became a special—then random—event. These days, I have to beg her to make *moros y cristianos*. The Cuban term for spiced fatback black beans mixed with white rice translates to "moors and christians." This reminds me of an old Havana joke that no two Cubans can agree on anything, not even how to make the dish.

My grandmother passed away when I was in high school. Hers was my first experience of a “true” Cuban funeral. Many people came, many of my grandfather’s friends were still alive then, many of their church friends too and their children. Most of the attendees were Cubans in exile, Miamians who had created a new Cuba there. I learned most of what I know about the culture from that night, as Cubans stay with the body for twenty-four hours, open casket. They also tell stories, particularly humorous stories, happy memories of ancestors making fools of themselves, fighting with one another, hilarious tales about the deceased no matter how sad their death. They punctuate each story with cup after cup of *cortaditos* (black and sweet cuban coffee) and *pastelitos* (guava or meat-filled pastries made with lard).

I remember walking out of the washroom that night to find a couple dozen family members in tears surrounding my great aunt Cora, who stood before them like a conductor. As I got closer, I realized they weren’t crying but laughing to tears. She was telling them a story about rescuing my grandmother from nuns, and that’s about all I understood. They laughed so loud that the funeral home director closed the doors so that we would not disturb other mourners.

Cora, my mother’s last remaining aunt, was the family orator, especially after my grandmother had gone. She knew all the family history. Now she’s one hundred and one years old and barely remembers that night or the histories or how to cook Cuban food (well, she was a terrible cook). Last week she told her caretakers to be quiet, said that she is hiding from Death. But the night of her sister’s funeral, her eyes glistened with the tales of a poor colony in the Caribbean, a people who built their homes with their own hands, who met every Friday at the dance hall, who made music so loud that the world heard them fall.

That was the same night I stood up in front of a hundred Cubans and told a small religious contingent of them to leave. They were not honoring my grandmother’s memory, and I told them—in my broken Spanish—that they were using the opportunity of her death to recruit more zealots. Perhaps it was the foreignness of the event, or the fact that they exuded a moral superiority that triggered my teen angst, or maybe it was the culmination of rage over the month that I’d already missed from my Junior year in Toronto so that I could watch my grandmother wither away in Miami, but I was pissed and so kicked a bunch of exiled Cubans out of my grandmother’s wake. She died slowly over time, a lingering battle with Alzheimer’s, withering away into a concentration camp casualty, like a David Bowie idol with big owl eyes who died in a hospice bed, in my arms. I still think of her when I see owls or eat *bistec empanizado*, her breaded steak that was so delicious it persuaded my grandfather to marry her.

We buried her on a sunny but cold Miami January morning, into the ground next to her daughter who had passed away nearly forty years before, just months after their emigration to Miami. My grandfather hadn't participated in the funny storytelling, he had hardened from the charming Havanan dance hall singer of his youth into a stone of anger, a white defiance of everyone, stoic and stubborn, stumbling on the way to her gravesite. He tripped, almost fell in the hole.

When my grandfather died a decade later, the cemetery had dumped an unknown body in his plot next to my grandmother. The only reason my grandparents had bought plots was to be next to their eldest daughter. My mother's sister died from Lupus so early on in their political asylum that they couldn't afford her funeral. Their church raised funds and a family-owned cemetery south of southern Kendall (a suburban swamp so far south of the city it was considered the Keys) donated her plot. In the half-century that followed, several large corporations had bought and sold the property, losing track of who was in which plot. When they discovered that some unknown body was buried next to my grandmother and aunt, they offered to move them, but couldn't. My mother's sister was buried in a pine box that couldn't be unearthed lest it disintegrate, exposed to the elements. So one day, my mother and I watched as they exhumed my grandmother to make room for my grandfather. They dug a hole more than thirty feet deep, returned my grandmother's tomb, piled my grandfather's tomb on top of hers, and then closed them all in. It would have been more than gruesome had the tractor not looked so orange against the always perfect Floridian sky, or had the sea of plastic flowers not blown like salsa dancers in the exhaust from the blaring freeways that scarfed us. The three of them rest between Miami and Cuba now, between a country that offered asylum—but not redemption—a land that never existed for me.

And I couldn't help but notice that at that last funeral, only my grandfather's sister-in-law, aunt Cora, remained a storyteller. She told relics of jokes to the few people that still spoke Spanish, reminiscing of the faded hope that Cuba would one day be restored, hope that "el bastard" would finally die, stories about people that didn't exist anymore except in the failing memory of a woman that never had children. The *cortaditos* were made out of instant coffee and artificial sweetener. And it was too late for me, everything I would ever know about my family was slipping into the ground slowly over time.

I was partly at fault. I, who barely know Spanish, decided that we needn't uphold the tacky Cuban tradition of carnation crosses nor the ridiculous wreaths made by Cuban illegals in flower-shops that resembled sweatshops. Instead, I filled my grandfather's wake room with sunflowers, an homage to a sun that I would never see, a sun that set before I was born, a place that I could never know except by piecing together the scraps of recipes stolen from a distant relative not

related by blood.

My skin is toasted like sand, but my mother is white as snow. And when she cries, her eyes get pink and puffy. And when she tastes my versions of *moros y cristianos* or *bistec empanizado*, she says they remind her of a place she once longed for more than love, a memory that hurts like death, a faint sun slipping into the ground at the horizon, a taste of something slowly over time.

And when people ask me where I'm from, I tell them I'm from Canada.

Breakfast with Friends





Winter Within

Behind the old farmhouse,
there is a hill, a playground,
long unused by me or my brothers.
Henry told me once that it was an ancient
Indian burial mound, teasing me.
Now, the snow has settled
sternly on the ground,
concealing the character of
everything in sight.

Bundled in my father's old coat
and the scarf I knitted for Henry,
finished just days before we received the news
from a man wearing a starched uniform,
and sorrow in his eyes.

I lie on the hill, indifferent to the threat
of the damp, encroaching cold,
cringing at the crippling memory of Clark
the youngest of our family, falling
through the transparent ice, unable to escape
the frothing fingers of the river.

The rivulets of his blood spreading,
staining the surface of the cracked ice
where it had sliced his soft skin
as he fumbled, flailed to hold on,
to resist, to survive.
He was only twelve, and I too young
to have lost both my brothers.

The ground on which I lie was the same
unforgiving earth that had been too frozen
to be tilled for their burial.
The earth that forced us to wait
and bury them early spring.

The stiffness started to pull its way into
my body, penetrating almost effortlessly.
I thought that neither the air nor the ground
itself was so insufferable,
that perhaps this piercing chill was
creeping, crawling from within.
Rising, I brushed the thought away
along with fragile flakes from my shoulder
as the sky hurried to fill my
shallow footprints with snow.







The muffled scream from the room across from my borrowed one disrupted my vibrant dream: feathery clouds, hyper white lilies and glitzy, undomesticated ponies all dancing—innocent, unmindful and unaware of the devil, Josef, wild and enraged across the hall. I shouldn't have cried to stay, but there I was, concrete and quiet on my back, in the two-bedroom apartment. The ceiling never looked as still as it did that night. The only sounds came from the revolving fan beside the nightstand and the house's midnight groans. I stared, waiting for a god to fall from above or burst through the door-commando style. I would have instructed him to rescue Auntie Lydia. I would've told the hero to kill him for saying those sinful things to her. But nothing happened. No magical appearance; no super call; no capes; no savior for Lydia. I heard Auntie's bedroom door open. I gripped the sheets and shut my eyes, trying to play sleep. My door sprang away from its frame. The beam from the lamp spread throughout the room.

"Git up, Bay Girl. Wake up. We goin' for a ride," Aunt Lydia said panting, visibly sweating. My eyes burned from the hot light, but I kept my hazy stare steady looking for any puffiness on Auntie's sweet face. There was none. Her hair reached and waved untamed like when she put the blow dryer near it. Her thin, yellow, flowered dress missed a few of its top buttons causing the bubbly part of her breasts to stick out further than normal. She packed my day clothes and extra panties in a grocery bag and stuffed it in her case. I knew then that we weren't just "goin' for a ride." We were leaving him. I was glad to leave the dark, screeching house. I smiled. Auntie became her own saint.

She turned to me and whispered, "Ready?" a question that wasn't really a question, because in the same breath Auntie lifted me and held me tight. I wrapped my arms around her neck and squeezed back. We were running into the night without notice. She grabbed the bag with her free hand and we were off. The house was dark and we seemed to be playing hide-and-go-seek. We crept around the corner listening to our seeker curse and loud mouth the fridge. We ran into the living room and my head swiveled, making my neck jerk and twist like it did when I was pushed too hard on the swings. We were nearly free when a dark voice startled us.

"What you thank you doin'?"

We jumped. Cold roofed my body and I felt bumps swaddle my back, arms and legs like they did whenever I was about to get it from Daddy. Aunt Lydia started to cry. My whines and tears followed as I gripped her neck even tighter.

"Leave me 'lone, Josef!" Auntie screamed through her tears. I shifted to look at our opponent. She trembled so hard I thought she'd fall. I plastered my chin to her shoulder and pinched my eyelids shut. I hugged her neck and

kissed her cheek over and over again trying to calm her like Mama did when I was afraid during a thunderstorm. I turned only to feel Josef's presence like a carpet-shock on my back. He pushed us against the wall and we went down like stacked building blocks.

Aunt Lydia pushed me aside and screamed, "Run, Bay Girl! Run!"

I ran into the room and fell to my knees to catch my breath. I sat and listened as Josef howled every curse word made. The words were followed by thumps and Auntie's whimper and cries. I stood to lock the door and allowed the noise to corner me near the closet. I balled up—knees to chest—and closed my watery eyes. The enemy's lullaby was like a heavy shower. It made me sleep only because I didn't want to think of what was going on outside. Aunt Lydia must have fallen asleep too. She was silent.

"Lydia!" I heard Mama's voice yell. The new voice woke me up like the granddaddy clock that sat in our front room. I sat up and slowly walked towards the door and turned the knob. Mama's wet eyes fell on mine.

"Bay Girl!" Mama cried as she lifted me into her big arms.

"Here. C'mon. We 'bout to git you outta here." Mama threw my big coat around my shoulders and slid my arms through the sleeves. She ran out into the hallway. I rubbed the crust out of my eyes and watched Mama's every move. I wondered if Josef was still there. Mama wasn't scared of Josef, though; I had heard her say that she'd whoop his ass herself if she had to. Mama lost her balance and tripped over an empty suitcase with a few of Aunt Lydia's things thrown around it. She grabbed the grocery bag with my overnights inside it and handed it to me on her knees.

"You stay right there, you hear me?"

I shook my head "yes" but disobeyed because my nosiness had a mind of its own; it led me into the front room battleground. I moved my head side to side like a puppy to get a better look of the mess that Josef made. Auntie's silence was a mystery to be explored.

"Aunt Lyd?" My voice cracked, so I tried it again, "Aunt Lydia?" I kneeled closer to her calm body and I ran my hand down the back of her arm. It looked broken. She was cold and solid. Aunt Lydia was ice. I stared at her head, covered by a brown towel. Josef did not care enough to wet the rag and wipe the sap off of her face. I lifted it and saw that Aunt Lydia's deep brown skin was now dry and chipping red and white crust. Some of the slaw must have mixed with the others making the color pink. "I'll help you Auntie," I whispered, picking at the pink frosting stuck to her skin with my pointer finger.

I wasn't used to this side of pretty Aunt Lydia. Her face looked like she swallowed five golf balls and they all went "down the wrong pipe". At that very second, I squeezed my lids, swallowed a bunch of spit, and promised to eat slower.

I guess that was what grown folks meant by that. Her neck was black, red and blue. There were very big handprints wrapped around it. I wanted to see how well my hand measured up to the one pictured on Lydia's neck. I made my fingers match the image like I was trying to fit a puzzle piece, I reached down, and suddenly I felt the pull of Mama's heavy jacket. I drank air as the snatcher turned me around so fast my head hurt.

"Didn't I tell you to stay put, huh?"

"Yes ma'am." I shook because I was not sure if a whooping was coming next.

"So do as I say and stay back!" My mother, soggy eyed and wobbly, spoke as if I had done something very wrong. It was all so dramatic. It reminded me of a scene from one of those womanly shows (as Daddy called them) that Mama watched faithfully on her days off.

"Yes ma'am," I said, eyes glued to Lydia. I continued my investigation, from a distance.

I backed up against Josef's reclining chair and posted on the arm of it with my eyes never leaving Auntie. For the first time, I realized that Aunt Lydia's big flowery dress was beside her. A naked body! I used to dream about growing up and having boom-booms as fat as my big cousins' and I even tissueed my shirts in the bathroom; but if my body looked anything like Aunt Lydia's when my time came, I was sure that those were bad dreams. I said a quick God-forgive-me prayer like Sunday School Sister Dawks told us to do when we thought of something bad. She said something about somebody named Karma coming to get us if we didn't say a quick prayer.

Auntie's breasts looked like two big ole socks stuffed with a lot of beans, one side fuller than the other. They looked like the art project that Mrs. Rickenshe made us do last year. Lydia's tummy was round and tight. I stared at her belly button and then lifted my shirt to size it up to mine. They looked just alike. We have "outies," but Lydia's was much fatter than mine. One side of my mouth lifted to a grin. I admired Lydia and prized being known as her "little twin." Her private was exposed and the hair on it looked like Daddy's hair. I closed my eyes, shook my head and covered my face thinking about how the hot comb would hurt ten times worse than when Mama straightened mine for Easter Sunday. I turned around when I heard Mama walking over towards Aunt Lydia screaming, cursing, speaking in tongues, and calling on the name of God all at one time.

"I'm here Lydia. I ain't goin' nowhere. Yo' big sister is here." Mama knelt down like Aunt Lydia was her alter at church. I slowly moved by Mama, combed her thick hair with my fingers and sat beside her, Indian style. I copied her humming and rocking, being sure not to miss a beat. During the funeral, I couldn't escape the raw image of lifeless Lydia, her

nude body splashed across the scruffy hardwood floor. Mama and I sat on the first pew and I watched Auntie, waiting for her to wake with her face no longer dry and chipping waste and spillage. The residue was replaced by what seemed like pastels and chalk. She was pale and she frowned. Thuggish Uncle Curti cursed and fussed about her lack of glee blaming the so-called racist funeral home employees for "letting her go out like that." The way she laid there was unnatural and she looked cramped. I questioned the professed "going home" services. What was the point in viewing a perfected body made-up in party dress and stockings? The worms and mites will rip through the cloth and time will dissolve the coloration of her skin leaving Aunt Lydia *totally* unclothed.

"You ready?" Mama said after they packed Lydia.

"Where are we going?" I asked unsure.

"To Aunt Lydia's, Bay Girl. Think you can handle that?" It felt like I swallowed a rock. A sharp pain scrapped my throat

"Yes ma'am."

The apartment smelled like fish grease and heat. The windows' curtains were open allowing the light to stretch out to the end of the hall making the wicked house a warm home. I stood staring at Lydia's cooling post and reflected. Without thinking, I squatted and caressed the forever-tainted boards. My dress adorned around me, made me look like a black flower. I rose and headed toward the guest room. I locked the door and plunked in the corner imitating my escape from the night of Lydia's death. I looked toward the heavens needing to talk to Auntie, but all that I could see was an empty ceiling, vacant and unvoiced. For the first time, without assistance from Daddy's thin leather belt, pain, or fear, I cried.



All rivers run the same: Lights
flicker and wave the same
across breaking waves.

I've crossed enough
myself to know.

Saw the Mississippi many
times crossing high on old
steel bridges of a

kind now unmade by man.

Saw shimmering mythical Memphis as I
came in from

Arkansas, just another vast
rolling I've passed

on my way to the mud vein
of America. All rivers run just
the same, married to some gulf
as distant as the river's source.

Justine and I roll here

up and down these banks,

the same few miles of

red mud shore — roll

with bums who

crouch down on sidewalks

waiting under sheet metal

awnings for the rain to blow by—

here too roll elderly

folks who know no more than

their mill town,

and why should they?

I saw the Danube long ago, and I
know damn well

I'll never see it again: content to

roll up and down this wide river,

mill town side, where bums also

come to stride by its banks and

camp under the concrete

overpass that covers

the river in day shade —

them bums who can't bum
enough to eat,
who rock from the rolling
streets come to sleep
and lick tongues and
roll among themselves
hidden beneath the high
pyloned pass:
America drives by overhead at night:
I see it, flashing headlights
across these low waters.

Studio Apartment

scattered posters
placed sporadically
on the ugly white paint,
sometimes it looks beige. but i'm not really
sure.

i spend most of the
time here
staring at walls.

between that and randomly
eating or watching t.v.
i lay in bed.

the mundane sound of
my fan and the clinking
of the air conditioning,
(is something like a melody.)

i masturbate everyday,
with my head leaning
against the wall
as i stare at my bare
legs. not even
thinking just moving.

my clothes smell like smoke
and i haven't used my stove once.
empty carton packs and plastic
bags have piled up.

crinkled papers
and used pens
crowd my desk
along with a letter
about me and god.

i will keep
smoking and
watching t.v.
eating canned food
that i can cook in the
microwave.
masturbating every
night to the sound of
that fan and clinking,

and maybe one of these
nights i'll actually sleep.

Pancakes from Scratch

The same roach crawls across my fingers every night. I'm convinced it does it on purpose. Right before I hit that deep sleep but long after I've drifted off, I feel its little legs scamper across my fingers and I am jolted awake. I haven't really slept since we came here. I'm not sure if it's the lack of pest control or the horrible circumstances that brought us here, but sleep deprivation is just something else added to the list of things that I decided to stop caring about weeks ago. Two months ago I would have shit myself if I saw a roach in my room, now this is commonplace. I grab the rag from my bedside table and wipe the sweat off my face.

"Couldn't sleep?" my mom is sitting in a chair in the corner of my room, her face in her hands.

"Damn bugs." I respond. She laughs a little at this.

"I'm proud of you. You used to cry every time you saw something that crawled."

"Yeah well... things are different."

"Are you ever going to forgive me Claire?" I feel like a zombie. I don't know how to respond. I can't even look at her. I just stare at the wall and wait to feel something, and for a long time nothing happens. I think about saying yes, because I know that's what she wants to hear, but I can't bring myself to lie to her. Not now, not after everything. So without experiencing any real emotion I try to answer,

"You ruined *everything*. You took everything away from me. We were all fine. We were happy. And now Tracy is gone. Jessica is gone. You are gone. And I don't know what to say. I don't know how to forgive you, or if I even want to forgive you. I can't even tell if I'm still angry with you. Nothing feels real. This can't be real."

I lie back down, throw the covers over me, bash a roach with my fist and slam my eyes shut.

...

The funeral was on one of those weird days when it's painfully sunny in the morning but pours down rain in the afternoon. People said this was lucky, lucky that the weather stayed nice for their funeral. I just thought it sucked. Go to your mother and sisters' funeral and it's sunny, come home, still depressed, and it starts storming. Real fucking lucky. My dad made me hot chocolate when we got home, something he used to do when I was little. It's not as enjoyable when it's the middle of summer, you have no air-conditioning, and your whole family was just killed in a car accident. I appreciate the effort though. He tries to smile at me from across the table while he swirls his spoon around in an old Mother's Day mug. I've never had a smile hurt so much before. My dad and I don't talk about my mom, not even when he's drinking out of her old mug and we're both

so obviously thinking about her. When they were together I could tell that he was crazy for her. Mostly because even if she wasn't making a drop of sense he would take her side, smile at me later and say "We both know your mother is a little crazy. But that's why we love her, right?" He would have done anything for her.

It's my sisters that he is always talking about now, Jessica and Tracy. I don't think that anyone can say that they've seen real sorrow unless they've seen a parent who's lost a child, and my dad lost two. Our shitty apartment is a shrine. The most insignificant, and honestly just unfortunate, pictures are on every surface that you can hang a frame on or stick a push pin into. They are also the only thing that my dad cares about keeping clean anymore. He's a different person now, but then I guess we both are.

The only time we've really talked about the accident was the night it happened. That was the first night that there wasn't a fight over dinner. The first time I wasn't forced to go and visit mom. She had come to get me and my sisters to take us out to the movies and then dinner. That was the night we were all supposed to meet Sandra, my mom's girlfriend. I refused. Out of the three of us, I was the angriest with mom for leaving dad. I hated her. So I didn't go. I stayed home. I know my dad thinks it's a miracle, but now it's my biggest regret.

• • •

Before this we were normal. Normal in the way that we thought we were different, thought our problems meant something, thought our lives were hard. A year ago my dad lost his job, and that was our biggest problem. He could have gotten another one. He could have worked at another corporate company and we could have remained well-off. Instead he chose to open his own business, a small one-man computer repair business. Basically a hobby. It's funny because my mom supported him. She *wanted* him to do what made him happy. But then the money dried up. She couldn't entertain herself anymore and the relationship that seemed so easy dissolved into something strange. My parents didn't fight or yell or even really try to express their problems. My mom just slipped further and further into depression. Then came the day when we finally lost the house. The second worst day of my life.

My dad came into my room, woke me up, broke the news to me about the house and then with tears in his eyes whispered, "Your mom's not coming with us sweetie. She just needs some time to figure things out. It's not permanent, okay?" I hated that he was talking to me like a child. I hated that he was pretending I didn't know what this meant. I wanted to yell at him but I saw the pain in his face, so I laid back down and cried silently.

• • •

It's been a month since the accident today. Part of me wants to talk about it, but I don't think my dad is ready. Besides, I haven't slept and I know I'm not thinking straight. I go downstairs and my dad is pulling waffles out of the toaster. Our new traditional Sunday breakfast. He used to make pancakes from scratch. Every Sunday morning I'd come downstairs to the smell of the most delicious pancakes, and when I was really young he would make them in funny shapes or let me pour the batter. I never realized how much I loved it until he stopped. I guess it's not worth the effort anymore. I cram two waffles down my throat quickly and then before I can catch the words in my mouth say, "Do you miss mom?"

"Of course I do. But we both know she was gone from my life far before the accident."

"I guess," I say shifting cheap Eggos around my syrup soaked plate. The kitchen is quiet for a while.

"Claire, sweetie, you know I loved your mother. You know that I would have done anything for her. But you have to understand, I had already come to peace with the fact that she was gone from my life. That was hard for me, and I grieved. But sweetie, she was never gone from your life and you need to find peace. I can see that you're still angry with her but all you are doing is torturing yourself. All of this is hard enough already."

I feel like a zombie again. Whatever emotions were running through me moments ago thinking about pancakes and Sunday mornings are gone. I feel nothing all over again. I have no response, but I know that he is right. I am still angry.

• • •

My eyes are closed, but I've been awake for a while. I'm not ready to open them, not ready to see whether my mom will be sitting in the corner. I hope she will. I'm afraid she won't be. Right as I decide to open my eyes, I hear her voice.

"Claire? Are you awake?"

"Yes," I respond.

"Oh. How are you tonight? How's your father?"

"What do you care about him?" I snap.

"Well, I was married to him for over twenty years."

"Didn't seem too important to you when you were leaving."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I just wish I could see him."

"Why don't you? He's right down the hall."

She looks at me sadly. It's not fair for me to point out how close he is when I know she could never see him again. For some reason it's only me she can see.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know that's not fair. But you know what's really not fair? I can't even ask you to leave. I'm so angry with you and all I want to do is yell and scream and tell you to leave me the fuck alone. And say things I don't mean, like 'I hope I never see you again.' Lock you out of my room and just be mad, like a daughter gets." Tears are welling up in my eyes now. But I fight to choke them back. "But guess what? I can't do that. Because you are gone, and I might actually never see you again. And I'm so scared to fall asleep because this could be the last time. I'm so scared you're not even really here. You're not here. You're buried in some cemetery on the edge of town, and I'm just some crazy person screaming at a ghost in a shitty apartment. And I can't even be angry. I never got to finish being angry. That's not fair." I've completely lost control of my tear ducts at this point, and so has my mother. "I'm afraid to forgive you. Because I'm afraid you'll really be gone."

I think this is what I have been scared of all along. Ever since the first night she appeared in my room I've spent every night praying that she'll be here just one more night. I want to walk over and hug her, tell her how much I miss her, but I know this to be impossible.

"Mom," I draw a deep breath, "I forgive you." I close my eyes and pray that she'll still be there when I open them. I feel lips press against my forehead followed by my mother's voice in my ear.

"I loved your father very much. You let him know that. And I love you too, Claire. Sweet dreams." I open my eyes and look around my empty room, and for the first time since the accident, I cry.

• • •

I don't sleep a wink for the rest of the night. The next morning I drag out my dad's old recipe book and make pancake batter. I pour sweat over the stove, but with every pancake I make, I feel a little lighter. I hear my dad come into the kitchen but don't look up. I feel a hand on my shoulder, and before I know it, I've been pulled into his chest in a tight hug. He whispers, "My miracle." And for the first time I don't feel guilty.

We stand by the stove hugging and crying for a while, and then eventually enjoy our greatly missed breakfast of pancakes from scratch.

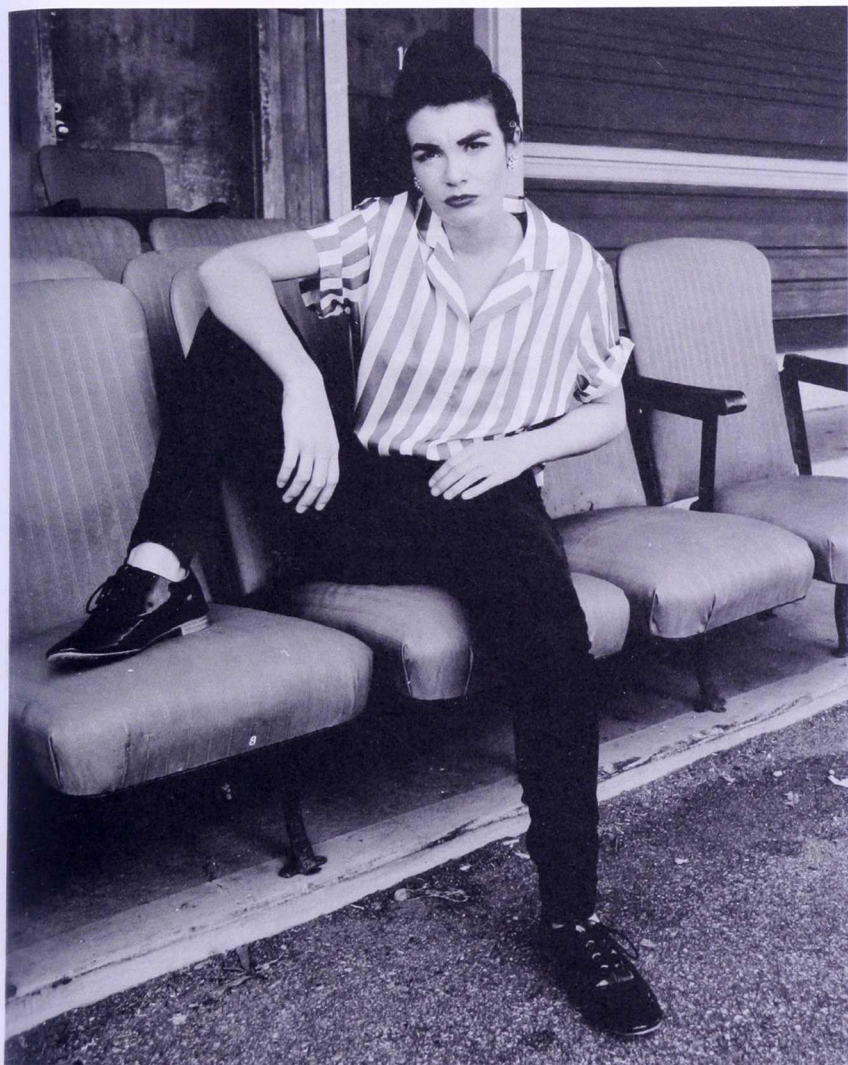
Everything feels a little bit better. Maybe we'll be normal again soon. Maybe we'll get to worry about money instead of mourning, and maybe we'll laugh soon. We might even cry over something besides Mom, Tracy and Jessica. Two months ago I would never have imagined any of this happening. Two months ago pancakes wouldn't be a big deal. Today and now, all I can think about is what's happened and pancakes mean everything.

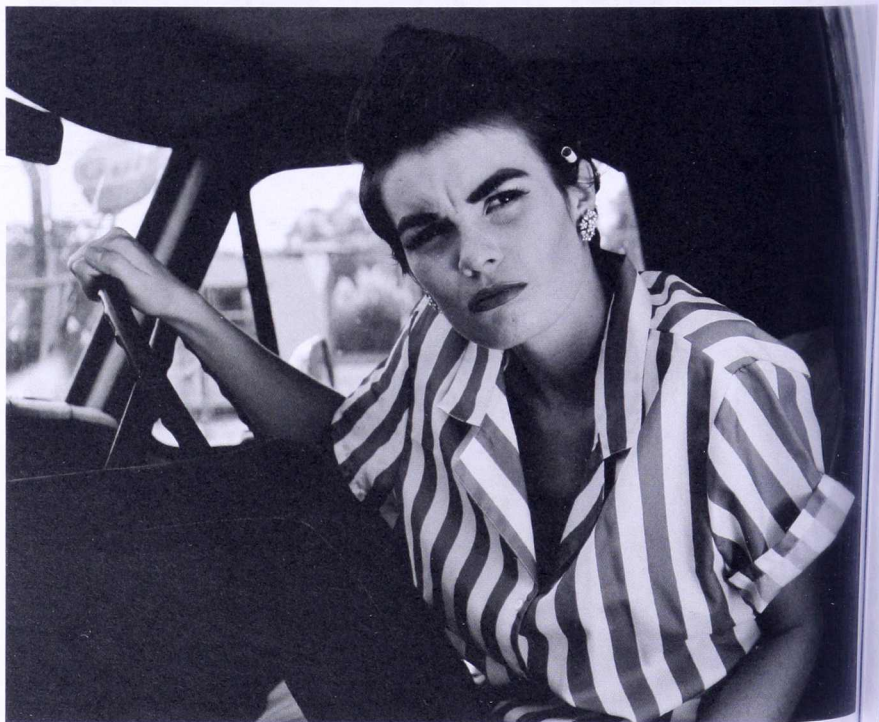
my father
used to hold this small book,
with the lacquered pages
and large print,
in his calloused hands
while he read aloud to me,
as a child.
his deep voice
rising
and falling
in a cadence,
that matched the story.

i would sit on the floor,
cross legged,
in front of his easy chair
and stare
at the drawing of Elmer Elevator
who was busy
putting bows
into the braided mane of a lion
surrounded by
fanned jungle flowers.

my father
would flick
the coffee-stained corners
of the book
back
and forth
as he read.

he would finish a chapter.
almost.
halfway through
he would start to nod off
his head bobbing
up
and down
until it would finally
come to a rest,
with his chin
nestled
into his collar.





Holly stared blankly out of the window watching the blur of green and brown race by. Her mind was empty, thinking of absolutely nothing and listening to the hum of the tires on the asphalt.

"Holly. Holly, are you even listening to me?" Jake asked.

Holly turned to face him. She saw his brown eyes watching her, and then the road. Her, the road. His lips moved slowly as he chose every word with precision.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?"

"What do you think about starting a family? I think we're ready babe. I know it's a big step but we've been married for four years now, and we have a lot of support. You know my parents would love to have grandchildren."

Holly knew very well how much her in-laws would love grandchildren. Mrs. Dover always found ways to bring babies into any conversation, mentioning the connections she still had at the most prestigious preschools, or the owner of the baby boutique she knew from her first job. Not to mention the daycare the family company provided. The kid would be set before birth, with its future all lined out and plated with gold. Yes, Jake would have perfect kids. They would all live in a perfect house with perfect smiles and never have to worry about a thing. Perfect was boring. Holly was definitely not perfect.

Holly's auburn hair wrapped around her face as she let the window down. She loved the way the wind felt as it whipped her hair all around, sending it into a messy array. It reminded her of Monterey and the long nights she spent lying on the beach back home. Maybe taking a music scholarship across the country at Belmont was a mistake. Holly didn't use her songwriting degree; she didn't even pick up a guitar anymore. When she met Jake during sophomore year, Holly had no intention of becoming so serious with anyone, especially someone like him. But Jake had it all. He was good looking and very smart. He was also rich. Holly closed her eyes and enjoyed the warmth the last rays of daylight left on her skin. Jake rolled up her window from his side of the car. As Holly's hair fell back into place, she tried to hide her annoyance with him. She pulled her knees to her chest and sat with her arms wrapped around herself.

"Sorry babe, the wind was loud and your hair was getting messed up. If you're hot, we can turn the air up. I don't mind. And don't forget Mom and Dad are coming over for dinner tonight," said Jake.

Of course they were coming over. It was Sunday—family dinner day. Holly sighed as she slouched a little lower in her seat.

Jake and Holly lived in a nice area on the outskirts of Summerville, South Carolina. Jake loved the place because it was only five minutes away from

his parents. He had lived there his entire life. Summerville was his home. Their house was a towering two-story Victorian at the end of a quiet street. Holly kept the house clean and the yard maintained. Her constant cleaning and gardening disappointed Jake.

"Why don't you let me hire someone to do that for you? We could even get one of the high school boys down the street to mow the grass, maybe weed your garden? You stay too busy, Hol. We could have more quality time together if you let me hire help," Jake said.

"I like it, Jake. It gives me something to do."

Holly knew it was a lie. She didn't enjoy cleaning the house. She only loved the blank state of mind it allowed her. Holly wore earphones, filling her head with soft tones of an acoustic guitar and steady beat of drums. She got tired of hearing about the business. It was not her sole concern as it was for Jake and his dad. There were only so many conversations to be had about the success and expansions of the business. All Jake talked about was taking over in a few years, and how his plans included passing down the Dover legacy to his son one day. It was a tiresome cycle of money, perfection, and success Holly found entirely too mundane.

...

Holly pulled her car as close as she could to the water. She sat in the quiet dark, watching the wind push silver glimpses of light across the surface. Wednesdays were book club night with the girls. There were no girls of course, but the story sounded true enough. The hour that she stole for herself was the only time Holly was ever alone. She closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat, trying not to fall asleep. She felt so relaxed by herself without constant small talk sounding in her ears. Holly felt guilty about the lie, but it quickly faded as she recalled the last time she had openly suggested she and Jake part ways for a night. Jake looked like his heart was a set of fine china that had been shattered on a hard granite floor. He suffocated her, but she didn't want to see him hurt. Holly glanced at the clock as it turned 9. Her phone would be ringing at any moment, full of questions about how the meeting went.

...

As Holly opened the front door, the smell of Chicken Alfredo blew past her face. She held back the look of disgust that the smell often provoked. Jake was standing in the kitchen with dinner already on the table. The room was dimly lit and two candles sat between their plates, casting shadows on the ceiling.

"Oh, hey babe. You're right on time! I made your favorite!"

Chicken Alfredo was not Holly's favorite. Any trace of Holly's appetite left as she thought about the texture of the cream sauce sliding on top of wet noodles.

She couldn't tell him, not now after years of him thinking she loved it. The dish had history. Holly remembered their first actual date when she answered the door and found him standing there in that ridiculous blue suit holding a bouquet of flowers. She had held back the urge to laugh hysterically. Jake took her to his hometown for the weekend. The eight hour drive seemed horrendous at the time, but somehow worth it. They had hung out together with friends for a couple months beforehand, and she really liked the way Jake clung to her every move. Once in Summerville, Jake took her to the top of his father's company building and served her homemade Chicken Alfredo in candlelight. She knew how much effort had gone into the date and told Jake it was her favorite thing to eat in the entire world. Now, all the wrong decisions that were made in the course of their relationship were obvious to Holly. She had agreed to stay weekends with him in Summerville from the beginning. She always let him tag along with her everywhere she went. At first, the gestures were cute; he always wanted to be with her no matter what she was doing. She didn't think it was odd that he went with her to the nail salon, or acted as her personal chauffeur. Jake paid for everything. She shouldn't have let him become so clingy. She should have told him she hated Chicken Alfredo.

While Holly ate, she could feel Jake's eyes watching her every move. It was true, he had perfected the art of Chicken Alfredo, but she still hated it. Ever since that very first date, Jake made the meal at least once a week, and once a week Holly had to force it down gracefully. When she finished, Holly felt Jake's stare as she crossed the room to put her plate in the sink. She ignored him and headed to the bathroom leaving the kitchen for him to clean.

...

Holly closed her eyes, sighing deeply as the warm water ran down her face. She was comfortable with Jake. They knew each other inside and out; they even bragged about it to their friends during the occasional game night. The monotony of her life left Holly feeling anxious about the future. Nothing exciting would ever happen and everything would be straight out of a novel ending with "happily ever after." Holly lathered the shampoo through her long hair. She let the water flow down her back, wishing the guilt of her emotions would wash away with the day's grime. Soap swirled down the drain, leaving her body lightly scented of Purple Plumeria.

Holly left the bathroom soaking wet, leaving footprints trailing from the tile to the deep brown carpet. She put on one of Jake's old shirts from the bottom drawer and glanced at him before putting it on. He wasn't asleep, but his body was already turned towards her side of the bed. He lay in the middle, leaving just enough room for her to squeeze between him and the

edge of the bed. She knew the bed would be warm. Every night, Jake warmed the bed with his legs, kicking between the sheets. Holly slipped under the covers and faced the wall. She thought about her relationship with Jake, how he wanted a family so badly. His relationship with his family annoyed her, but she was left with no choice but to put up with them. Holly's unhappiness wasn't fair to Jake. He didn't make her feel confined on purpose, and it wasn't fair the way she led him on, making him believe that she was happy. Holly lay silently, trying to clear her mind. Jake's arms found their usual place wrapped snugly around her torso. Holly could feel herself suffocating under his weight. Her breath got heavy as he relaxed, settling in for the night. As she lay awake, Holly felt the overwhelming urge to run. Her legs became tense with the thought of running away and not slowing down to look back. Frustration and anger ate at her soul.

...

Holly stood in the kitchen making Xs on the calendar. She had become obsessed with marking off the days, as if she were counting down to something big. Of course there was nothing, she thought to herself. She noticed how the days seemed to blur together as she tried to recall what she did last weekend. What did she do every weekend? She and Jake drove to a friend's house. They drank too little and talked too much. They took a slow Sunday drive after the noon potluck at First Baptist. As she made an X through Tuesday, Holly's heart leapt up as she realized that it was again Book Club night. She walked a little quicker back to the bedroom to get dressed.

...

Holly let the seat back up and stared out towards the water. She turned on her headlights and followed the beams down to the bank where two ducks slept with their necks nestled close together. She looked at the clock – 8:55. Holly sighed and turned her headlights off again. Outside the air was chilly and Holly thought back to the summer nights she had spent on the beaches of Monterey. The nearest beach was an hour away, which was still close, but nothing compared to being able to look out a window and see the rolling waves. Holly's cell phone began to vibrate in the cup holder. 9:01. She stared at the phone before leaning forward and putting the car in reverse. As Holly pulled out of the parking lot, she tossed her phone out of the window and watched it shatter on the ground under the yellow glow of the streetlights.

you're a fish I feed occasionally
and forget about; your bowl is sludge and
some tap water and chemicals, a tree
made of plastic, and a couple full hands
of cheap marbles. you smell like shit. and
when you called today, i didn't answer.





nobody knows how
you did it. or if
there was pain or what
the last thought was.

after last time,
no one asked.

they opened your
casket for us,
a long line of grieving
students wrapped around
the pews of the sanctuary.

some didn't make it to the
altar where your body was.

i did.

your neck was
bloated,
and they put too
much make-up on you.

my friends cried
into me,
one after the other. i
wasn't shaken,
i wasn't crying,
i was just standing outside.

and there in that moment, i
abandoned everything
that made me different from you.

As the breeze teased the random rebels
That had escaped my braid,
I closed my eyes and savored
the pounding of the waves.
The tide taunted the sand,
and the children laughed as they
stormed the repetitive puddles,
played chase with the surf.

And you, fresh from a colder climate,
amusement animating your eyes.
I found myself captivated.
You, cavorting in the current
like an innocent child,
ripe for adventure.

The moment's innocence, lost forever,
betrayal having severed the link,
A connection picked apart
like the rotting flesh of a jellyfish
Exposed to scavengers.

For When We Are Older

No one ever brings up the night my great uncle went into my Aunt Nadine's room when she was fifteen. It was supposed to be a secret, how hot and heavy Uncle was with the stench of cheap alcohol as he stumbled in the dark; his reaching, his feeling, his fumbling to her. My grandfather didn't know what to do. My uncle was his brother and only living relative from his life before my grandmother. What do you do when your brother violates your daughter's body? My first response would be anger but my grandfather is not a man of anger, he's a quiet man. He's a hardworking man who umpired for his youngest son's baseball team. My grandfather told my uncle to leave. He didn't use his son's baseball bat but said "leave" and "go," in my mind, broken English, but in reality, broken Spanish. Broken, not because he didn't know the parts of speech or grammar rules in his first language, but because it hurt, it just hurt.

I imagine my grandmother tried to comfort my aunt. She tried to hold her in the light, removing the darkness by pushing the switch up, my aunt shaking. My aunt's brothers and sisters huddled at the doorway, my mother among them as my grandmother tried to speak with a stifled tongue in Spanish. "What did he do? What did he do?" My aunt Nadine must have looked so small, so childlike, shaking her head, refusing to speak. She never answered my grandmother's pleas. Her only words were her head buried in her chest and knees. Her tears like a leaky faucet that will never stop running, that can never be fixed.

I tell this all to Kelly, my not girlfriend of five months. She doesn't say anything but looks directly at me. To avoid her stare I stare at the walls and the ceiling. I notice the intricate waves of design, weaving with one another, all with purpose, all with meaning, all holding it together. I feel that the walls are telling me to continue but I'm nervous. Not so much of her reaction or that we are hiding in my brother's room but the fact that before this moment I hadn't remembered this until now. Now because the walls let a memory bleed so that I could give it to Kelly. Kelly, who is pretty and quiet and who had just met my parents that night. Kelly, who had kicked me out of the kitchen because while I tried to cook her shrimp, I kept leaving the shells on their bodies. I tell her this, I need to tell her everything because I need her to stay and let her know that I can get close to her. So, I close my eyes and part my lips and wait for my tongue to speak.

"I'm mad at him because he came in me," Mel said as I tried to steer, having dropped off her boyfriend Erick at his parents' house. My best friend Rachel was in the seat beside me. Her stark blue eyes glanced at me then stared directly ahead as she pushed her pale brown hair out of her face. Mel leaned close to my ear as I dug my fingers into the wheel. Mel, a younger reflection of me, smirked.

"We were having sex and since it was his birthday he kept begging me to let

him have sex without a condom on. I said only if he didn't come in me and he said he wouldn't but he did anyway. I'm pissed."

"What?"

"We were—"

"I heard the first time."

I turned on my bright lights in an effort to wade through the darkness. My parents live in the boonies, and cow pastures are everywhere. I had spent the previous four months in college, in a city where there were actual lights. Even though I could barely see I had to make it home safe just so I could leave again in the coming weeks.

"You know I can buy the condoms for you. I don't have a problem doing that. I just wish you weren't so easily persuaded to do such things."

My sister took this as I wasn't getting any in college. That I didn't understand 'how great' having a man inside me could be. I told her I knew what it was like, and to trust me, it's not that great. I prefer a softer touch.

...

When I got the text that my 16 year old sister was pregnant two months later, I did not immediately think of my aunt Nadine. For when your 16 year old sister texts you she's pregnant while you're in the bathroom at work, it causes you to be blind and even though you study literature you continue to miss the foreshadowing in your own life. I mean, who texts someone that they are pregnant? You text: 'hey let's go to dinner' or 'would you like to catch a movie sometime,' but 'I'm pregnant,' that deserves a phone call!

I called her when I got off work and she told me what happened. About how mom had some dream that she was pregnant so mom took her to the doctor the next day and, well, she was pregnant. I felt uneasy as I tried to understand that my baby sister was going to have a baby. After I got off the phone with her I slumped to the ground in my apartment.

My roommate walked in and I told her about my sister and then I just cried. People always say "that'll never be me, I'll never get pregnant young." You don't think "that girl will never be my sister," but it is my sister. My sister gets to be the one called "loose" and "whore" and I'm hours away in college, unable to protect her from her own actions and the actions of others. I had shut my eyes in an attempt to stamp out all unwanted thoughts and did what I did best: stared at the walls and the ceiling, hoping there would be some secret message in the dust of the fan blades in my room.

I look at Kelly again, to give her a chance to speak. She hides her face in her long brown hair that has mounted across her shoulders. She pushes up her glasses and I see her green eyes. They look brighter than usual tonight.

Beneath pursed lips and a chapped mouth is some sort of beauty that I cannot hold or reach. I stare up.

The dust from the fan had gotten into my eye, so I fumbled to take it out. I went into the restroom to run my eyes under the cool water but they continued to stay red. I looked into the mirror and decided that I needed to take a trip to my parents' house soon, talk to my sister and do the obligatory "it's alright" and "we'll get through this." I wondered if I could even make a sound at all. I tried my voice out but it sounded weak. I thought about the options, she should know her options.

I remembered when she told me that Erick was "the one," how she knew this when he kissed her and she'd do anything so they'd be together forever. I wondered if her forever plan entailed getting pregnant and having him in the form of a baby, forever. I questioned her motives and why she was so set on having the child. She would later refuse talks of adoption and stamped out abortion. She was having the baby. She also wanted a letterman's jacket for running track, a class ring, her graduation cap, and a new car. My sister was 16 and did not understand that she didn't get to be the kid anymore, that it was someone else's turn.

...

For the most part I'm terrified of the Interstate but the night I had to go pick Erick up who was drunk, driving around in a Wal-Mart parking lot, I felt nothing. I had Rachel beside me again as I hurtled through the night past honking cars and darting trucks and swerved into the exit lane of the Wal-Mart where I told Erick to stay parked. I spotted his puny red car with the spoiler attached to it and parked next to it. He was not in the car. Rachel and I found him on the ground in ripped jeans and a red polo, crying. The trials of fatherhood and the trials of being the father of my sister's child had taken a toll on him, and he had called her, frantic, in the middle of the night. I prepared for a speech as Rachel grabbed his right hand and I grabbed his left hand, together, we had pulled him up to his feet. I threw him into the backseat of my car and took his keys from him and shoved them into my pocket. He whimpered and looked out the window. When I got back on the Interstate, I did not speed. I did not need throw up in my car.

He told me how he lied to my sister because if she knew he'd gone out she'd be mad at him so he was forced to lie. Erick's buddy had taken him to a party and brought a girl for Erick to have sex with so he could relax because my sister is a "bitch." I couldn't disagree with the fact that she had been brutal before and especially now with child. I knew Erick's mother was acting as if the ultrasound pictures were of a speck and not his coming kid. He told me how the girl said he was ugly and he cried, he cried because she thought he was ugly and he cried

because he didn't want to cheat on my sister anymore. So he peed in the party thrower's sink and they kicked him out. He then dialed my sister, drunk. He wanted to know if I was glad he didn't cheat on her.

I told him he needed to shut up. I told him he needed to grow a set of balls because the father of my future niece or nephew needed to be a man, not a little boy. I also requested that he not tell my sister about the other girl and to continue looking at the stars. When we got home, he didn't listen and told her anyways. They cried and he slept in the bed with her, my mother pretended to be asleep, Rachel decided to go home, and I decided to look at the ultrasound pictures, all this for a speck.

While looking at Kelly, a list of what she knows and doesn't know about the twins calculates in my mind. Have I not already told her enough? And why isn't she responding? I can't focus on this because I'm too busy focusing on what is going on in my head instead of hers. The image of going to the hospital after Mel had given birth prematurely via C-section filled me. I could see how they looked with all the hospital tape and wires coming in and out of their noses and mouths. How Mel had sex with Erick which induced her pregnancy. The nights she wouldn't use the breathing machine the doctors prescribed. The diagnoses the doctors had given and what I feared would be my nephews' early demise. But Kelly doesn't know all this nor will I tell her, ever. I just let it sit in my head and watch inside myself as Kelly watches me.

On January 23, 2009, I walked to Dominick's plastic and safe container and put my hand through the little hole and reached for him. His right arm shot up and he made a fist around my finger and held on tight. Erick snapped a picture of Dominick's first feat. I went to Davis, my godson and reached for him. He smacked my hand away and I laughed because of the possibilities. It was in that moment that I knew I was capable of love. Before them I had been fine with the fact that I had felt very numb, wading through life in waves of highs and lows. I had always thought myself like the Grinch with my heart five times too small and my shoelaces on too tight. I looked at them and I knew that was over.

...

Kathleen, my other sister, and I had been talking when Mel walked into the room and asked us if we remembered Uncle. Right then I had felt my stomach lurch. Right then I remembered my mother telling me of my aunt Nadine's story and the version that had mulled over and over in my head. My Uncle had lived with us and I couldn't believe I had forgotten this. I could not remember why he did or exactly when but that we were young, much younger. He had stayed with us in our two bedroom duplex taking a

room for himself. My family crammed into the master bedroom. My brother in his crib next to my parents' bed while Kathleen and Mel shared the bottom of a steel white bunk bed and I at the top.

My uncle was a round man with penguin-like features, he in fact reminded me of the Penguin in the Batman movie. He would ask us to go to his room if we wanted candy. I denied his requests because I didn't like sweets. Uncle would sit Mel on his lap and hand her a Hershey bar. I would stand in the doorway and watch him and his penguin shape. He had no hair on his head because he was old but the hairs he did have were white wisps clinging onto his peach scalp. His nose was like a vulture's beak and his eyebrows dark and furrowed. He always wore the same clothes: a white V-neck showing the white hair on his chest and gray work pants. His feet were always out in the open because he was always touching them, dipping them in rubbing alcohol. When he began to feed my sister the candy is when I believe I developed my sense to beware of evil men and the practice of not knowing what to do. And that's when I hear it and snap back into my reality of Kelly and I and then back to the reality of my sister. The walls let me hear it: "He touched me."

When Mel told Kathleen and me those words, my vision became skewed, and I could no longer see. I couldn't see because I was bogged down by tears. We all cried and didn't say a word. Whatever Kathleen and I had been discussing before Mel's entrance to the room will be forever lost in some stored repressed memory file in my brain. In all our pictures of the three of us as sisters, I always look angry having to be next to Mel. I look miserable because we, all three, are matching and have to hold hands. That night we matched again, all of us having the similar tan face, dark eyes and hair, and now tears. And this time we were not holding hands because mom made us, but because that is the only thing we can think of doing. With our hands linked, we got onto the queen-sized bed, and all three of us lay intertwined.

The bed was in flood of our tears, and I found that I could not stop crying. After hours of no words but sniffles and choked sighs, exhaustion came and led us into sleep. My mother came into the room the next morning. Surprised, she called out that she had never seen us get along so well. Though droopy eyed, we looked at one another in silence and did not tell. We would not tell.

When my sister becomes engaged to an Army man who says he has all this money but provides unlimited emotional abuse, I shouldn't be surprised. When your sister is given candy in exchange for being touched, you shouldn't be surprised that this is what she will do when she is older. This is how she will act. The signs are evident in the way she treats your nephews and the way she has sex with guys for material gain. It doesn't matter how many necklaces, roses, or rings she'll get. It will never be enough.

I will try to talk her out of marriage with the Army man. I'll tell her she

needs some sort of therapy, that she needs to stay. But the more he screams at her, the more willing she will be to go wherever he will be stationed. He'll break several cell phones and punch holes in the walls when they fight. I will fear for my underdeveloped nephews.

When he is sent to Germany he will cheat on my sister. I'll try again to get her to end it, but he is her ticket out of Georgia, out of family, out of everything. It won't matter if he screams or slams her into a wall in front of the kids; she is going to stay with him. He will have a car, an Xbox, and a flat screen TV because that is what really matters, to her.

Kelly, through pursed lips, asks me if I'm okay. Months later, I won't remember the answer. A year later and I won't remember what she said, but while she is in front of me I can't but think of how beautiful she is. We get up from my brother's room and I drive her to the Reservoir. I am excited because she is by my side, and I truly believe it is because I can finally tell her things. While we lean against the wooden fence, I do not think that in two weeks she will leave me for a guy with a Mohawk and a real dick. When she is kissing me for the last time, I never expect the call that Mel has taken my nephews and left the day before Christmas.

In a year and two months after I tell Kelly about my aunt Mel and Uncle, I will drive the two hours it takes from Columbus to my parents' house to take my other sister, Kathleen, out to lunch and ask her if she remembers. She will. She will say she has been starting to remember a lot of things from when we were kids. We will laugh at some of the memories and then get back to the one I was paying the lunch for and then she will say:

"I guess we just forgot. We probably all got along for a week and then fought again, so we forgot, we forgot it happened."

I will order dessert. The waiter will give us these sticky ravioli shaped donuts that I will push into the chocolate dipping sauce and smear all over my plate. All this will not be something I can tell my parents, my brother, Nadine, my whole family, or even Mel. I will not be able to imagine my father's reaction or my mother's face if Mel were to deny she ever said it. I won't know if Nadine will want to talk to me again if these words are in print or if my nephews will ever develop normally enough to find messages in the ceilings and walls in order for things to make sense. This is for when we are older, maybe then we will understand. But I won't know any of this because I'm on the couch with Kelly, at Kathleen's apartment. Kelly is about to fall asleep and my arm is around her, but I can't think of any of the people in my family or their feelings. All I can see is Kelly breathing, lips parted slightly, her chest in the up and down motion.

Sex with you is like
Putting together legos
Only
There are only two in the box
And there are only so many combinations
That can be done before I move on
To another toy.

Conversations with you are like
Tornados that hit always hit
The same places.
You'd think someone this self-destructive
Would be more interesting.

Writing poetry about you is like
Counting my nail clippings and calling it
A productive day
Even though I haven't actually
Clipped my nails.

It is just beginning to get dark and the stars look amazing. As I adjust my scope to keep the Orion Nebula in the center of the field of view, I hear a *talker* approaching. Inwardly sighing, I turn and smile. Thankfully, my annoyance is short lived, as she is just an innocent with questions—not one who will spend their entire night arguing over facts.

We chat lightly as she looks and steps to the side to continue talking with me while another takes a turn. After answering some questions about astronomy, the conversation turns to more general things.

And then, the dreaded question begins to surface. At first I found it amusing, but these days it is more tiring than anything else. Still, I'm representing the Space Science Center. That means smiling and being polite no matter what I may be feeling.

"Yes ma'am, I am a student at CSU. Most of us out here tonight are students, except for the professor."

"That's really great. I suppose you get credit for this for a class or something?" she continues.

"Actually, it's a part-time job. We get paid to come have fun." I laugh, and she joins me in mirth for a moment.

"Ah. Well, are you an astronomy student then?"

And there it is. The question that leaves me somewhat at a loss for a good answer. If I simply say no, she'll ask if I'm another science major. If I say what I am, she'll laugh and ask how I managed to find myself here. It's just conversation, but a *déjà vu* conversation nonetheless.

Society today wants everything simplified. Take a look around you. We categorize everything: from food and clothing to animals and people. Depending upon where you are from, there is a stereotype to describe you. Kentuckians are hillbillies. Asians are good at math. Artists are moody. The list goes on and on. It has even crept into how we view likes and dislikes. People are surprised to find out that someone likes pickles but dislikes cucumbers. We find it amusing to find someone who enjoys rap music and country music.

One of the biggest examples I can find of how we group and label people today is one you are probably very familiar with: paperwork. That's right. Think about the process you go through anytime you want to do... well, anything. One of the very first pieces of paper you touch will ask for your name and background information. And hidden on that sheet of paper, a little question will ask you to label yourself. White? African American? Latino? Asian Pacific Islander? Other? And always, without thinking, we will check ourselves into those categories. How many people check "other" to explain? Not me. Though if you were to ask me about it otherwise, I would tell you a long story about how I am German, Indian, Canadian,

French, etc. But when it comes to the “official” paper work I am simply “White” or “Caucasian.”

In this day and time it is hard to find someone who does not categorize or stereotype on a daily basis. While most people would define themselves more along my lines and explain that they are many different things all at once – German and a writer, a cook who is also part French, an Indian Artist – we, as humans, defy classification and simplification just by being ourselves. And yet... we do it. We box ourselves and others into easily looked at labels. Admit it. You do it—you meet someone new and the first thing you do is categorize them. While we dislike being simplified ourselves, we naturally do it in our subconscious to everyone.

A prime example can be found when looking at literature. Think about how you learned to study stories. The very first thing you are taught? Hero versus Villain. When we start off by boxing away even our great literary figures into simplified categories like protagonist, antagonist, supporting characters, static characters – how can we *not* do the same to every person we meet? Our default way of dealing with people, real or otherwise, is to first categorize them into an easy paint-by-number. Then, and only then, will we move forward, deeper, and find ourselves surprised when they do not fit the bill we had originally drawn up.

Not too long ago, in a galaxy we know very well, a time we read and study about today – we had the Renaissance Man. A person who took interest in *everything*. He could know art and medicine, philosophy and literature, politics and play – and still he enjoyed his dinner and slept peacefully at night. What happened to that?

Today, the Renaissance Man would belong in a circus. We marvel at those few people who seem to do it all. I remember meeting Story Musgrave at one of the Space Science Center’s anniversary celebrations and thinking to myself, “How?” He is an astronaut, a surgeon, a landscaper, a father, etc. How can one man do so many things? Where do you fit it in?

It is the system that fosters this limited view of the world. It is media, books, TV shows, games—they all push us toward this way of looking at things so basely. There are so many rules about being politically correct that it is sometimes hard to say anything at all. In everything we watch or read, we systematically sort through what should be dynamic characters and make them one-dimensional. We call them the hero, the comic relief, the villain. We call them Republican or Democrat. Religious or atheist. We never dare to look a little deeper at the many swirls of personality that color a person into someone more.

Globalization is where I believe it started. I could be wrong, sure, but it is my opinion that by opening a door to the world, we have also closed the door to who we are. Everyone is so set on demanding that everyone be seen equal that

it is hard to see anyone as individual. We pretend there are no differences between us and Europe, or Asia. But there are many differences. In culture and traditions—and it is those differences that define us.

My great-grandfather was French. From France. And he spoke French. But not to my grandmother and her siblings. No, they only ever heard the language when he became angry and it slipped, or listening to him talk to someone else who knew French. He refused to teach them the language for fear it would make them stand out in their new home. My grandmother laments this fact to this day. She knows a word here or there, but cannot truly speak French. She has lost a part of her heritage in the name of Americanization.

Look at how much universities focus on and make students take core classes, hoping to have them garner some understanding of other disciplines. Look at the emphasis placed on study abroad programs. We *know* that we are losing touch with each other and we are fighting a valiant fight to make it not so. But sometimes it seems in vain because we still do not have the time to “round” ourselves, to see things in new perspectives.

Why is it we have to live in a world where it is genuinely surprising to the average person that a creative writing student also likes astronomy? Why is it no less shocking to know that people are still *people* with a variety of interests and an assortment of knowledge—just like your own?

Having an array of hobbies, interests, and knowledge is the first and most important part of being human. Curiosity is intrinsically a part of who we are. Denying it means denying who we are and what we are truly capable of. Yet so many of us do. We ignore opportunities to learn about others, about the world around us, because it is easier to assume that we already know exactly who or what is out there.

I think it is time to take back who we are. To deny the labels, the categories, the stereotypes. It won't happen quickly. But it must happen—before we lose what it means to be an individual forever.

Polaroid Photo—Mother's Day 2008

Out there in middle stretch nowhere
on some dusty back road weaving through
barren plain land, I could feel the callous sun tuning
to the wind's lavish psalm, bumping along in the bed
of my uncle's '79 Jeep CJ5,
nestled under the soft blue.

When we came upon the house,
it was a sullen structure, once meek and now less,
atoning to the slow abate.
Over rotten stairs and into the threshold,
furniture stares at itself, serene
with the severed heads on the wall,
solemn and omniscient.

A pile of clothes in the bedroom floor,
some bleak and some fluorescent orange,
accompanying the mattress and a Johnny Cash
8-track case, faded in its dispirit.

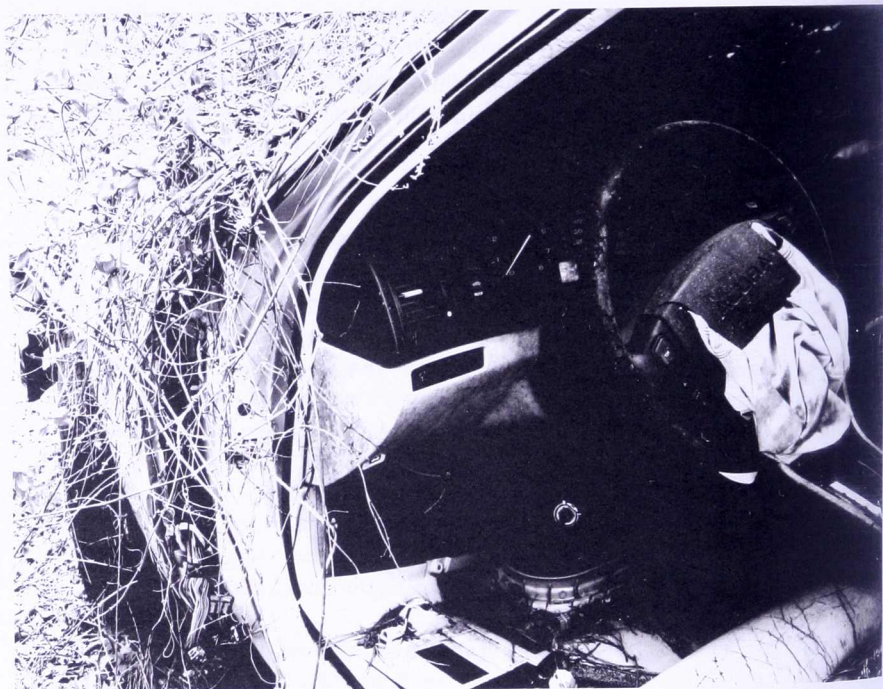
In the kitchen, a rusted kettle and dishes
molded in the sink, left to mellow
under the divine light of a cracked pane
and the dreamy Georgia air —
here,
there was no dwindling, no relentless clench
of existence, only that stifling silence
sustained in the careful
lapse of time.

I found it cloaked,
artless and askew on the bureau,
a dormant relic of passed affection, diminished
but still shining softly alive in its antiquity,
creased in the cracked hue –

for Aunt Claudia, Mother's Day 1978

—the soul behind that stencil
was as distant as death, lodged somewhere in
the trickling stream of black, beating gently
against cobble and oak.

And there I was, standing in the yard
breathing and happy,
under the supine sky.



you grow them till they are big enough to swallow you
whole, like some species of cannibalistic spider

in sub-Saharan Africa: till they can dissect you—a frog
on the table—and sell your constituent parts for

Research. they showed up, a little jellybean wrapped in
swaddling Gerber, a bundle of joy-ish discolored

feces expecting room-service and seven-hundred-or-so
dollars a month, crying, whining, whining, spitting

everywhere. the only answer is to stick your head in the
oven or suck it up, because it's your seed you spilled.

When, after love, you shower and I
retire to beers,
when we meet again
(I in my recliner
and you on your sofa)
for a movie,
there's no motive attached
to gestures, words, or laughs
before slipping into bed.

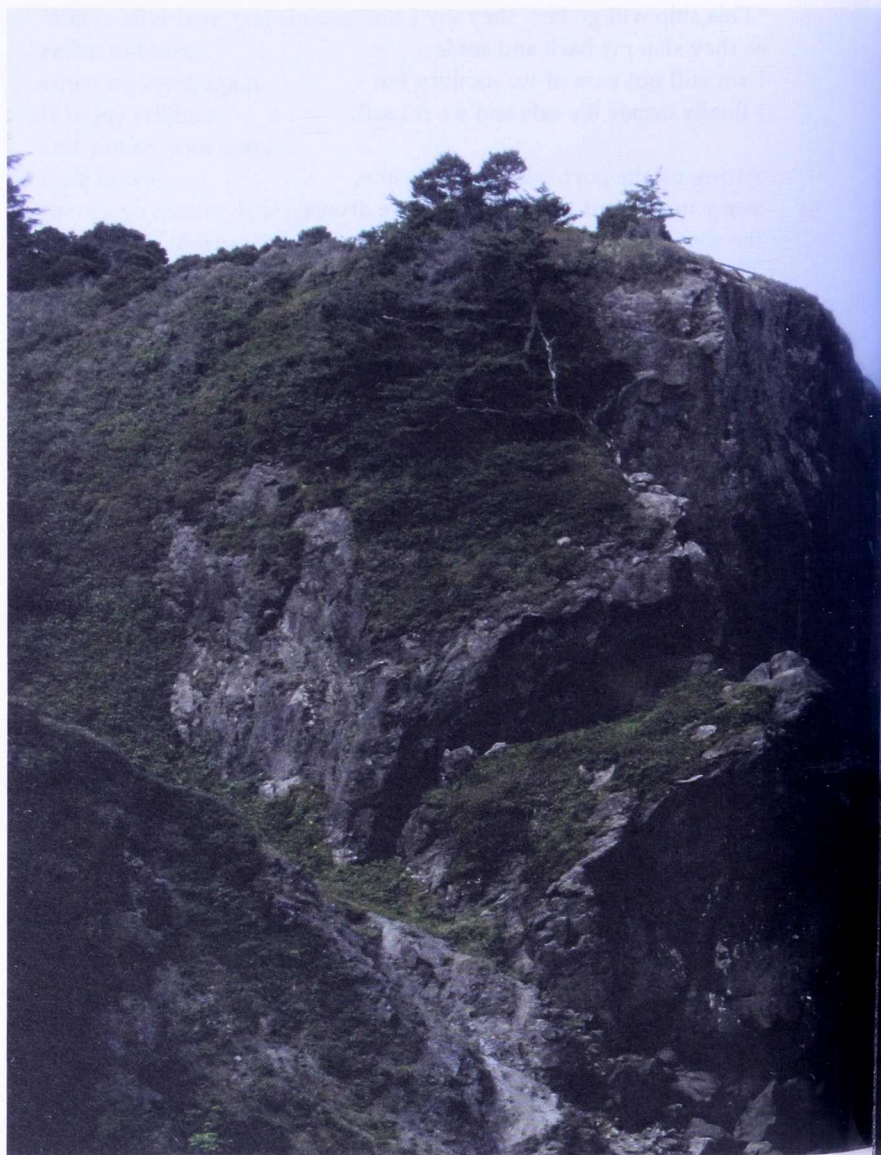
"This ship will go far!" they say
as they slap my back and smile.
I am still not sure of its stability, but
I finally decide it's safe and we set sail.

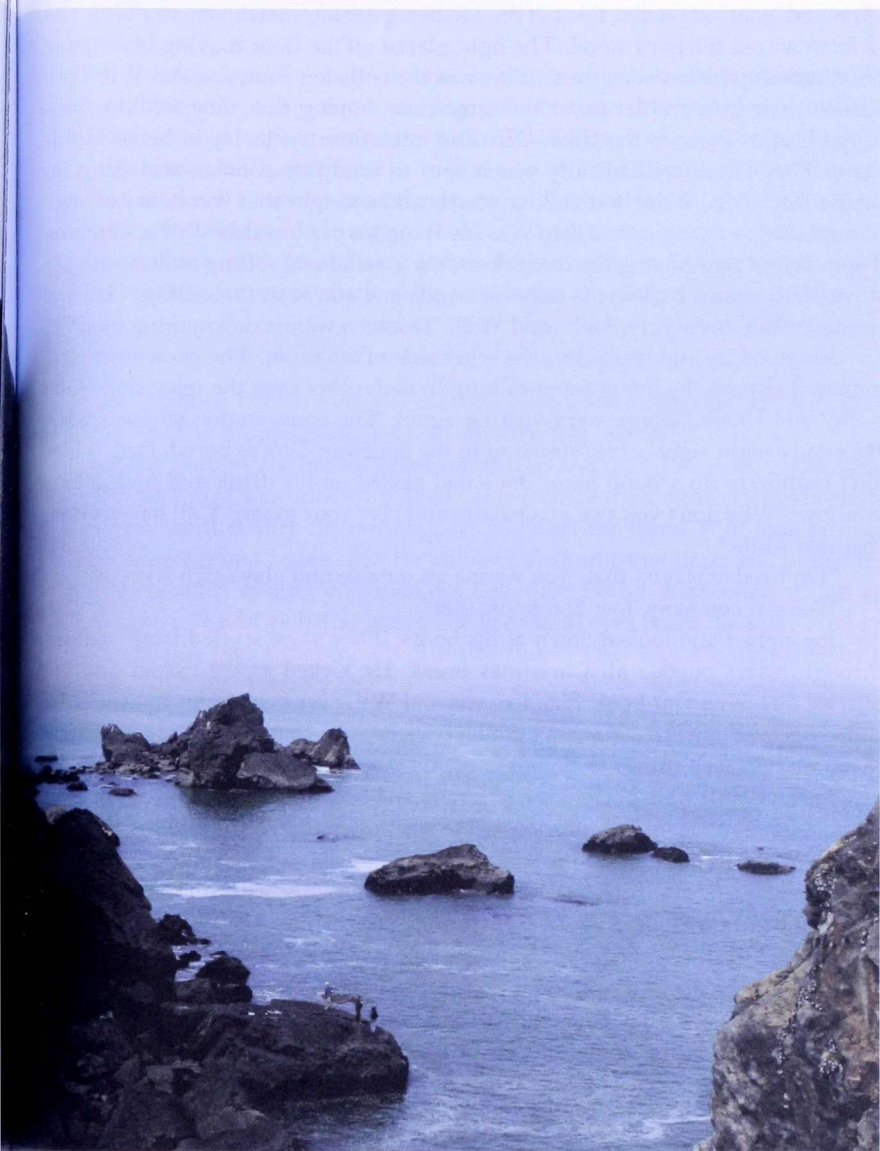
Sitting on the port side I start to sing,
as my men shout sweet melodies we drown
the sound of the sea.
The smell of a storm is strong.

I hear the subtle thunder out west
and I know it will be testing us soon.
In what seemed seconds the storm was on us.
The sea swayed and smashed the sides of this
S.S. Sound.

The lads and I struggle to secure the necessities
There seems to be no sign of the end of this squall.
Six hours pass and the storm has capsized us.
Everything is lost, the Sound aims for sand.

I see my mates being swallowed.
As the salty sea rushes in my lungs
I can hear someone calling me softly.





Empty Jars

Joe and Will sat on the floor of the kitchen, pushing matchbox cars back and forth across the hard wood. The light glared off the floor making one round, illuminated space between them. This was the collision zone. Joe and Will both pushed their cars and let go at the same time, hoping that they would collide in the bright space on the floor. Cars and miniature trucks lay in heaps beside them. They chose methodically which ones to send into combat, searching for the perfect car with the best rolling wheels and a weight that was heavy enough to send the toy flying across the floor. Joe flung his car towards Will's, watching it spin before ever hitting the lit circle on the ground and rolling underneath the stove. Will leaned backwards onto his hands and stared at the ceiling. "Ain't ya tired of rollin' these cars, Joe?" said Will. "Dontcha wanna do anything else?"

Joe stood up and walked to the other side of the room. The grownups were gathered around the living room talking to each other over the television. Aunt Kathy and Uncle George were visiting again. The conversation stopped when Joe's dad caught sight of him standing in the doorway. "We're bored, Dad. There ain't nothin' to do around here." Joe's dad picked up his drink and took a long swallow. "Why don't you two go upstairs and play your game? Y'all haven't done that in a while."

"I'm tired of playin' that. You wanna go outside and play catch with us?"

"I've got company, Joe. You know that."

Joe sighed and looked down at his boots. They were scuffed from walking through briars outside all Christmas break. He kicked at the carpet and bits of dried dirt fell off his boot. "Say Joe, you and Will ever been Snipe huntin'?" Joe rolled his eyes upward. "You ain't gonna trick us with that ole joke again. I know there ain't no such things as Snipes."

Joe and Will were both in the 5th grade and became friends while riding the school bus together in the mornings. Joe was taller than Will and his hair was much shorter. Both boys had the same bright blue eyes and the same gap between their front teeth. Will's jet black hair was always dingy with dirt, and his skin stayed much tanner than Joe's, even through the winter seasons. Although he was shorter, Will could beat Joe in a foot race any day.

Joe sat back on the floor and scooped up a handful of matchbox cars, tossing them into a plastic box. Once all the cars were picked up, Joe and Will both walked into the living room and sat on the floor in front of the T.V. Will was always at Joe's house, especially when it wasn't a school night. His mom was hardly ever home. She worked two jobs, making sure Will had everything a kid his age might need.

"Y'all remember when Grandpa used to tell us those stories of all those ole Mason jars buried all over this land?" Aunt Kathy asked. Joe sat staring at the television, eavesdropping on their conversation. "Oh riiight," said Joe's dad. "Come to think of it I do remember that, Kathy. Why, I bet there is still tons

of those jars outside in the ground. It's a wonder nobody's ever gone looking for them."

Joe nudged Will and the two boys got up and towards the front door, grabbing their jackets on the way out. As they slammed the door behind them, a loud laughter rattled the walls. Two BB guns were left leaning against the house. Will picked one up and turned to Joe and said, "We gonna shoot some more? I sure do need the practice." Joe looked at his friend. "I think I got a better idea." Will sighed and held tight to the BB gun. "Aw come on," he whined. "You know I ain't got no BB gun at home to practice with. Let's just take a few more shots, ok?"

• • •

Joe grabbed his BB gun and the two boys walked towards the back of the house. The ground crunched beneath their feet. Although there was no snow on the ground, the brown grass was frozen and cold. The fence surrounding the backyard was lined with glass Coca-Cola bottles, most of them busted in halves so that only the bottom part stood on the fence. Will took position, leaning against a pine tree. He pumped the gun three times and pulled it to his shoulder, aiming one open eye down the barrel. Joe looked at him and laughed. "I told ya before you gotta keep both eyes open," he said. "And you gotta only pump that ole BB gun two times. That way it'll bust the bottles instead of just leavin a hole."

With both eyes wide open, Will pulled the trigger. The ground in front of the fence spit dust into the air. The glass bottle stood on the fence, mocking him. "I sure am glad you let me borrow your ole BB gun Joe," said Will. "I like tryin to shoot them bottles." He pumped the BB gun two times and aimed towards the fence before pulling the trigger. He watched the bottle on the fence shatter to the ground and turned to Joe to give him a big grin. "That was good, Will," Joe said. "You done exactly like I told ya to do. I'll give you a couple more shots then it's my turn to pick what we're gonna do."

Joe sat down on a stump in the yard and propped his elbows on the gun lying across his lap. After three shots, only one more glass bottle was disturbed from its place on the fence. Joe cleared his throat and stood up. "Alright," he said. "Now did you hear what Aunt Kathy was talkin about inside? About them ole Mason jars full of money my Great Grandpa left in the ground?" Will nodded. "Well," said Joe, "Me and you are gonna find 'em."

"How come you're so excited about them ole jars, Joe?" Will asked. "Didn't ya hear her say that they been there for a long time, and ain't nobody been able to find 'em? If grown folks can't find 'em, how you think a coupla

kids like us gonna find 'em?"

"We got somethin' them grownups ain't got. I found my dad's metal detector in the shed last week when I was helpin' my Ma get the Christmas stuff out. It's just sittin' there, ain't bein' used. I'm sure my Dad won't mind if we borrow it for a little while," Joe said. Joe stood up from the stump and aimed his BB gun at a bottle. He pulled the trigger and watched the glass fall from the fence. He tossed the gun aside and ran off towards the house. Will stood in the backyard, looking at the broken glass on the ground. He kicked the dirt with his shoe while he waited for Joe to come back.

Joe returned with his hands full. He carefully placed the metal detector and the two shovels on the ground. "You carry the shovels," Joe demanded. "I'll do the detectin'. And sling one of them guns around your shoulder if you can, just in case we see anything worth shootin'." Will slid the strap of the BB gun around his neck and picked up both shovels.

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The woods were dimly lit and sunlight fought to reach the ground through the trees. Joe pushed a button on the metal detector. A red light began blinking on the screen and a faint sound pulsed through one small speaker. Will followed him down the dirt path, surrendering to the thought of looking for the lost money jars. The further they walked into the woods, the more tired his arms became. He stopped and propped the shovels against a tree. Drops of sweat slid down his face and he took his jacket off and tied it around his waist. "Hey Joe watcha gonna do once we find the money?" Will asked. "What are ya gonna spend your half on?"

"Watcha mean?" Joe asked. "This money ain't ours, Will. It's my Great Grandpa's. Since he ain't alive no more I reckon that makes it my dad's money. I wanna find the jars so I can give it to him. He'll be real proud of me then, don't ya think?"

"Well," Will began, "I mean your dad ain't gonna miss the money, Joe. He don't even know we're out here lookin' for it. How come we couldn't just split it up? Then maybe I could give some to my Mom so she wouldn't have to be gone so much workin'. Ain't that a good idea too, Joe? Couldn't we just split the money up?" Joe raised his eyebrows slightly. "I don't think so," he responded. "I gotta be honest and give the money back to my dad. It ain't ours to split up." Joe started walking again, aiming the metal detector towards the ground and making wide sweeps across the dirt. Birds above in the trees whistled songs that were familiar to the boys.

Will's arms grew weary from the weight of the shovels. "Joe, do ya mind if we switch off for a little while?" he asked. "My arms hurt from carryin' these things." Joe looked back at him and shook his head. "I don't think so. If that

stuffis too heavy for you, you really ain't gonna be able to hold this heavy thing up. Set them down for a while, give your arms a break."

"I wanna look for the jars too, Joe," Will said. "You never let me have a turn at nothin'." Joe stared at Will long and hard. His face became flushed and he dropped the metal detector on the ground. "I always let you have turns," he said. "You're the one always borrowin' my stuff, usin' my things and comin' to my house when your mom ain't home. I always let you have turns." Will shook his head before Joe finished speaking. "You only let me have turns after you're tired of havin' yours," he said walking towards the metal detector lying on the ground. Joe stepped forwards and put his foot on it. "You ain't gettin' it, Will," he said. "It's my family's money we're lookin' for. If you don't want to help me do it, then you can go on back by yourself."

Will took a deep breath in, and exhaled smoke from the cold air. "Who says I can't look for it by myself," he said. "I can dig around till I am the one who finds it. Then I'll do whatever I want with it." Joe picked the metal detector up from the ground. "Go ahead, you ain't gonna be able to find nothin' without knowin' where to dig first. And you can't know where to dig without the detector that I got." He turned around and started walking in the opposite direction.

The boys didn't fight often, and when they did it never lasted long. Joe knew that Will would come around and catch up to him. As he walked on, Joe listened for the sound of footsteps that would surely be coming behind him any minute. He only heard the steady crunching of the leaves beneath his own two feet. Will kicked the dirt and stood paralyzed in the middle of the dirt path, watching Joe's shadow descend down the dirt path. He wouldn't follow him, not this time.

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As the sun set lower in the sky, Will found a spot in the ground and plunged his shovel into the dirt. The hole got deeper and deeper and Will's hands became bright pink, blistering from the wooden handle of the shovel. His mind was made up. He would dig until he found something. He would show Joe for sure that he could manage without his help and that ole detector. Sweat stung his eyes as it dripped off his forehead. With a final stab at the dirt, Will felt something hard in the ground.

"Hey, Joe! I think I got somethin'!" Will screamed in excitement. "There's somethin' in the dirt, come look!" Will lifted his head out of the top of the hole, scanning the woods for Joe. He saw him running full speed towards him, holding the metal detector high above his head.

As Joe approached the hole, he slowed down and pressed the buttons on the metal detector again, for good measure. He peered down where Will was

standing waist deep in dirt. "Look," said Will, tapping the shovel into the soft dirt beneath his feet. "You hear that? There's somethin' in there." Joe's eyes grew wide. "Hop on outta that hole Will," he said. "I'm gonna jump down there with the detector and see if it finds anything." Will stood paralyzed in the hole. He shook his head back and forth. "No way," he said. "You ain't gettin' in here. You'll just take the jar and claim it for yourself. I found it so it's mine."

"Will, those jars are on my land. They're my property. You ain't fixin' to take nothin' out of that hole without me knowin' what it is first. Now get up." Will's hands gripped the shovel tight. His eyes began to water like they always did when he became mad. He looked up at Joe and stared him in the eyes. Joe stared back down into the hole at Will, neither one of the boys blinked. A wind blew through the trees and the leaves rustled high above. Will looked back down at the dirt, and scooped out a small pile with the shovel.

"Hey! You better stop right now Will, I'm warnin' ya," Joe yelled from the top of the hole. Will tossed the shovel aside and pushed himself out of the hole. Tears streamed down his face as he looked at Joe. His face was clammy and his hands shook with anger. Will knocked the metal detector out of Joe's hands and pushed him backwards.

"What the heck, Will? What are you thinkin'?" Joe asked, dumbfounded. "You better not do that again or I'll punch you square in the eye and make you wish we woulda never been friends." Joe clinched his fists tight as Joe stepped towards him again. A final shove sent Joe flailing backwards onto the ground. Will stumbled forward, losing his balance from the push. He regained his footing before falling to the ground. "At least say you'll split it," Will said calmly. "You know your daddy don't care nothing about them ole jars. He won't care whether there was a hundred dollars in there or only five. Your daddy gives you anything you want and mine done ran off leavin' me and my Ma with nothin'. Say you'll split it Joe, say it!" Joe scooted his body away from Will. His hand found the other shovel lying on the ground and beside it, the BB gun. "I ain't splittin' it and that's that. You're crazy for even thinkin' I would give you anything the way you're goin' on, actin' like a big ole baby. I would never have asked you to come with me if I woulda known you woulda tried to steal from me. You're no friend of mine."

Will's face began to burn. He ran towards Joe rearing his fist back, aiming his hand for Joe's mouth. As he did, Joe pulled the BB gun off the ground, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. Will fell to the ground, screaming loudly and clinging to his eye. Blood ran down his face as he rolled on the ground, crying in agony. Joe opened his eyes and panicked. He ran towards Will and grabbed his arm, trying desperately to pull it away from his face. "Let me see Will, let me see," he begged. "I didn't mean to shoot ya, honest." Will's grip was firmly pressed to his eye. The louder he screamed, the more blood poured off his face.

Joe ran towards the house for help, stumbling over his feet the whole way.

The house seemed like miles away, and Joe could see the back porch light on. The sky was much darker than he realized. Joe called for his dad as he got closer to the house. "Dad! Please come help, Dad! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt him!" The back door slung open and Joe's dad ran down the wooden steps. "Dad," he screamed. "I shot him! I didn't mean to, I promise!"

Joe's dad met him in the backyard and grabbed him by the arm. Joe sobbed as he tried to explain. Before he could finish, Joe's dad was running into the woods, following Will's cries. Joe sat on the back porch and held his head in his hands. He cried loudly, sobbing so hard his whole body shook. Will's cries got closer and closer and as Joe looked up, trying hard to catch his breath, he saw his dad carrying him in his arms. Will continued to scream, still clinging to his face. His shirt was crimson red. Joe ran off the porch steps and followed his dad carrying Will towards the red pickup truck. "I'm real sorry," Joe pleaded. "I didn't mean to hurt ya." Joe's words faded into the sounds of Will's wailing. The three of them got into the truck and slammed the doors behind them.

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After hours in the emergency room, Will's crying finally settled. His clothes were covered in dirt and blood and his hair was swept towards one side of his face. Joe nudged him on the shoulder. "You asleep, Will?" Will moved a little closer to the edge of the plastic bed and adjusted the white patch covering his eye. "Can't we still be friends? I said I was sorry didn't I?"

Joe looked over at his dad sitting in the chair next to him. "Let him be, Joe. As soon as his mom gets here me and you are goin' home." Joe sighed as his eyes started tearing up. "I just want him to know I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to really hurt him. "Sorry don't make up for that patch on his eye, son." Joe scooted his chair closer to Will's bed and placed his hand on top of his. The hand underneath was quickly snatched away.





Pieces of What

***Les Misérables* (1862), Book II, Chapter 7**

“The beginning as well as the end of all his thoughts was hatred of human law; that hatred which, if it be not checked in its growth by some providential event, becomes, in a certain time, hatred of society, then hatred of the human race, and then hatred of creation, and reveals itself by a vague, brutal desire to injure some living being, it matters not who.”

The Older Brother, Matt, Spring 2003

“See! This is why Mom’s sending you away. Do you know where Mom’s sending you? She’s sending you off, you’re not going to live with us anymore. It’s called Eagle Ranch and it’s for retarded people. There’s a big fence and bars on the windows... Yes, she is sending you there she said it was there or the military school, Josh. Just shut up, I don’t want to hear you.”

I am twelve years old.

EagleRanch.org, *About Us*, 2011

Nestled in a quiet, rural Georgia community about an hour northeast of Atlanta, Eagle Ranch is a Christian-based children’s home for up to 66 boys and girls between the ages of 8 and 18. The Ranch is a multi-faceted center—a home, a school and a counseling center—where children live for a season of their lives while their families learn to put their lives back together again...it is a place “where hope soars.”

Introductory Meeting Transcript Tape, JOSHUA JARRETT – S.S.N. 253-XX-XXXX – Summer 2003

[Video of a small windowless room furnished with new looking couches and some fake plants. A young boy sits sheepishly on the edge of a couch staring at the door, while a conservatively dressed woman holding a clipboard sits pertly on a chair nearby. Set into one wall is a large, semi-transparent mirror.]

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Alright, well, welcome. This is just a meeting to sort of figure out where you’re at, what’s going on in the home, see how Mom feels, see how you’re feeling and maybe work out a plan for you. So, to start out with, do you know why you’re here?

JOSHUA: Um, ‘cause I um, I’m not going to school?

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Yes, well, your mom said that the home schooling didn’t work out—

JOSHUA: I just sit around all day. I mean, I draw and stuff, and I play video games and read sometimes. And I want to build stuff.

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Like what?

JOSHUA: I dunno, I just draw like different vehicles or buildings and stuff and I want to build them.

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Well, here at the Ranch there won't be a lot of time for drawing or building, there are chores and responsibilities. But what I'd like to get at is your behavioral problems and school problems. Why did your mom try to home school you?

JOSHUA: I don't get good grades in regular school and I hate all the kids there. I went to a bunch of private schools and then public middle school, and I failed sixth grade, but I passed summer school, and that's when she wanted me to stay home.

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Yes, your, uh, grades are here in your file.

[Female Counselor thumbs through a large, disheveled looking dossier. Visible are physiological testing results, I.Q. testing results, photos, drawings, old school work, etc.]

FEMALE COUNSELOR: What about your behavioral problems? Can we talk about that?

JOSHUA: I guess Mom and I fight a lot. I hate being home alone all the time, we don't have a TV or a computer, just old books I've read all of, and a radio. I listen to 750AM a lot. I've been all by myself in the house, everyday for a year now. I hate it.

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Your Mom says you're disrespectful and you two fight a lot.

JOSHUA: I guess.

FEMALE COUNSELOR: Yes, in her examination she mentioned as much. What about your relationship with your brother, Matt, your mom says that you and he fight consta-

[[REMAINING TAPE LOST]]

Personal Journal January 27, 2004

Today, Mom came and had a teacher/parent conference. In Language Arts we're going to read *Johnny Tremain*. My roommate J.D. is the "Thing That Won't Shut-Up." I want to hit him. As I write this I've had to ask him five or eight times to be quiet. In the gym he sprang his ankle and now he's acting like he broke his leg. He asked me to get his backpack from downstairs and I told him no, and that I won't believe his ploy. Because I know he's just doing it to get attention. Then he asked me to get his toothbrush that was in the closet and I couldn't find it. Then he got up and hobbled along to the closet and started touching stuff on my dresser, then went in there and moved stuff around and yelled at me 'cause I didn't know that his toothbrush was under stuff.

Personal Journal, February 1, 2004

Today was good. No infractions. Kedar and I are getting along. I hate J.D. so ~~fucking~~ freaking much. Kim Flory said I should pray for him and then I'd see things differently. It didn't work. We may have a chance to not go to school because it may ice. Mike Flory said it will probably ice.

Brave New World (1932), Chapter 15

"High, low, from a multitude of separate throats, only two voices squeaked or growled. Repeated indefinitely, as though by a train of mirrors, two faces, one a hairless and freckled moon haloed in orange, the other a thin, beaked bird-mask, stubbly with two days' beard, turned angrily towards him. Their words and, in his ribs, the sharp nudging of elbows, broke through his unawareness. He woke once more to external reality, looked round him, knew what he saw—knew it, with a sinking sense of horror and disgust, for the recurrent delirium of his days and nights, the nightmare of swarming indistinguishable sameness. Twins, twins. ... Like maggots they had swarmed defilingly over the mystery of Linda's death. Maggots again, but larger, full grown, they now crawled across his grief and his repentance. He halted and, with bewildered and horrified eyes, stared round him at the khaki mob, in the midst of which, overtopping it by a full head, he stood."

Nighttime, Winter 2003

Three boys with backpacks lay flat on their stomachs in the rural dark. They need this, all day they live in subtle but constant paranoia that they are going to get in an argument with someone or mess up or forget a certain task or chore; they could lose their possessions, lose their phone privileges, anything. Doing this lets that tightened fist in their brains relax.

They are covered in scratches from diving into the bushes so quickly, but it was important, the headlights passing on the solitary road by the stables had to be avoided at all costs. One of the boys, Shem, is large, red headed and has done this before. He instructs them to take their backpacks full of toilet paper and go on ahead; the target, the Glory Home, would be around the next corner. Another boy, Jeremy, short, fat and generally disliked but always craving to be liked, lags behind. He's nervous. The other two shove him forward; the lights on the front porch are off.

They begin throwing the toilet paper. The last boy is taller than the other two and has not been at this place for very long, he remembers some advice his brother gave him and uses the hose to wet the house, making the toilet paper difficult to remove the next day. The house looks like it's wearing an economical mummy costume.

The boys are running silently through the woods, returning to the unlocked back door of the same house where the fist will clench again the next day when they hear the news that someone TP'd a girls' house and they will all act convincingly surprised.

Personal Journal, February 11, 2004

J.D. is freaking out. He has gone crazy. He's calling me a thorn in his side and a useless nothing. I don't know what his problem is. He thinks he's perfect and I'm Lucifer. I'm not saying it's all him, but I'm really trying. Michael thinks I'm doing fine. Jeremy thinks I'm doing fine. J.D., of course, thinks I'm the devil. Today Michael's mom found lice on everyone but Jeremy. But he had it anyway.

Therapy, Spring 2004

Counselor Bruce: "So, tell me about your dad, Josh."

(I don't know. I never met him, my mom and dad separated months before I was born. What does this have to do with Matt or J.D.? All my siblings and I have different dads. Their dad is named Lynn, I don't know him. And J.D.'s just my roommate. Why does this matter?)

Counselor Bruce: "Do you ever miss your dad?"

(No. I never met him. I'm fine. Really, I know lots of kids in this conversation or situation or whatever would say no, but it would really be like some kind of thing or something where they were hiding being sad but no, I'm fine.)

Counselor Bruce: "Would you ever want to meet your biological father?"

(I grew up with my grandfather and grandmother 'til I was eight. So he was kind of my dad. I want to talk about how J.D. acts towards me. The stuff he says to me at night while we're going to sleep. He really thinks he hears those stupid voices, you know? I still think he's doing it for attention.)

Counselor Bruce: "What about your mom maybe going on a date? What if she remarried? What about that?"

(I don't know! I guess I hope he's rich or something so he can buy stuff so my weekends back home will be nicer and he'd fix the air conditioner. I don't think she wants to do that though. Why would you ask me this? Ask her.)

Counselor Bruce: "What about your relationship with God?"

(I don't know what that is except just things they say at church, but I believe it all so much. When I try to imagine it I wonder if there's really anything there but I'm afraid to admit to myself and especially to say anything out loud that I wonder that 'cause I know it'll break the spell Bruce and I need that spell right now because I miss my Mom.)

Counselor Bruce: "Well, I'm glad to hear that Josh. I think you're a Spiritual Warrior. You should minister to J.D. more. He needs The Lord to work in his life."

Daytime, Fall, 2004

Kim: Josh, you need to calm down. JD's parents are inside and they're saying they want to sue for bullying.

Joshua: That's ridiculous! You see how he acts towards me too. If he has a reason to sue me then I have the same, it's the same! I hate him.

Kim: Joshua. The only person whose actions you can control is you. JD's not going to be here for much longer but look at you, this is it! Turn yourself around or this might happen, his parents are serious. Find a way to get along or just don't speak to him.

Joshua: But you've heard him. It's like I'm the only one you notice when there's an argument or something. He called me gay.

Kim: Oh come on, just 'cause you don't drool over girls doesn't mean you're gay. And this isn't just about today, it's every day, these shouting matches. I've

never heard two people fight so much in my life and it's got to stop. The aggression, the pettiness, it's all got to stop.

Joshua: Yeah. I know, I just... are they really going to sue me?

Kim: Probably not. But you need to stay out here on the porch awhile and we'll discuss consequences for you both tomorrow. We'll bring you in when we eat dinner.

Joshua: When will that be?

Kim: Around six.

Joshua: What time is it now?

Kim: Um, hold on. [She leans in the open front door] How's everything in here?

Mike [from inside]: Oh, you know, just fine. We stopped the bleeding.

Kim: Good, I'll be right in, what time is it?

Mike [from inside]: About 2.

Kim: Thanks. (returning to Joshua) It's about 2.

Joshua: Ok.

EagleRanch.org, *Reflections*, 2011

"I began a recent devotional talk for the Ranch children with this, «I don't know what circumstances brought you to Eagle Ranch, but I do know that if you want a promising life, that journey can begin here for you.»

Sometimes it's important to openly acknowledge the pain that our children feel before we can even begin talking about «solutions.» The average age of a child coming to Eagle Ranch is twelve and, at that age, just living away from home can be very traumatic.

We want to join our children, even in their feelings of despair and hopelessness, and echo the words of the prophet Jeremiah, «For I know the plans I have for you.[P]lans to give you hope and a future» (Jeremiah 29:11). Our desire is that our boys and girls will embrace God's plan for their life and His hope for their future.

Thank you for your partnership with us as we serve the children entrusted into our care. God bless you.

Edwin J. Staub" [Founder and Director]

Nighttime, Spring 2006

A very flat, grassy field is dark blue and quiet at two in the morning on a school night. A fifteen year old boy lays on his back wearing baggy cargo pants, a black shirt with a big yellow Star Wars logo on it and an unzipped, blue hoodie. He has short, wavy brown hair, no glasses and only a suggestion of facial hair. He has known this field very well for three years now, he's played innumerable games of soccer and flag-foot ball here. In the middle of the night it's his place to sneak off to be alone, and he only ever wants to just be alone. He still misses his mom. But he's going home soon, in a few weeks he's leaving to go be in the world again. He thinks about this every second of the day.

The Restaurant at The End of The Universe (1980), Chapter 19

"It is known that there are an infinite number of worlds, simply because there is an infinite amount of space for them to be in. However, not every one of them is inhabited. Therefore, there must be a finite number of inhabited worlds. Any finite number divided by infinity is as near to nothing as makes no odds, so the average population of all the planets in the Universe can be said to be zero. From this it follows that the population of the whole Universe is also zero, and that any people you may meet from time to time are merely the products of a deranged imagination."

First Week of High School, Fall, 2005

Jill: So, I saw you get off a white van with a bunch of other kids this morning. Do your parents foster or something?

Joshua: Something, I guess. I live at Eagle Ranch.

Jill: Oh, are you... like, I'm not trying to be mean, but is it like an orphanage?

Joshua: No, it's not an orphanage or a prison. It's like a home thing. It's divided up into houses all with like, Christian names. There's six or seven kids in each house and two house parents. When I first got there I was in Middle school and I lived in the Hope Home with Mike and Kim but when I was old enough for high school they moved me to the Joy Home with Julie and John who I hate. They're so awful. Anyway, they have a middle school there on the property but not a high school so that's why we come here to Flowery Branch High School every day.

Jill: Oh, so this is like, the first time you've been around normal people for a while. That's why you're kind of weird, not in a bad way but, I dunno...

Joshua: Yeah, whatever I guess.

Facebook.com/eagleranch, 2011

"1,148 people like this."

Fall 2011

I've just turned 21 a couple months ago. My hair is wildly long and thick but well brushed and my beard is scandalous among the chipper, conservative men I occasionally run into here. I'm in the waiting area of the Administration building of this children's home I lived at for a few years. At the beginning of every college semester I come here to turn in some paper work regarding a scholarship they have for their "graduates." The money helps. There is some mild, polite chit-chat that's part of the transaction. I always figured it was a way to size me up. I try to mention how well I'm doing and complain/boast about the work load and the cost of art supplies. I reckon they expect me to eventually donate a painting or something.

The place is styled like a cabin, huge wooden floors and beams overhead. It's the perfect mixture of warm yet impressive. I'm not comfortable. Too many memories.

Blog Post, December 30, 2005

There is a plant in my room at the ranch, my mom gave it to me, it's lucky bamboo.

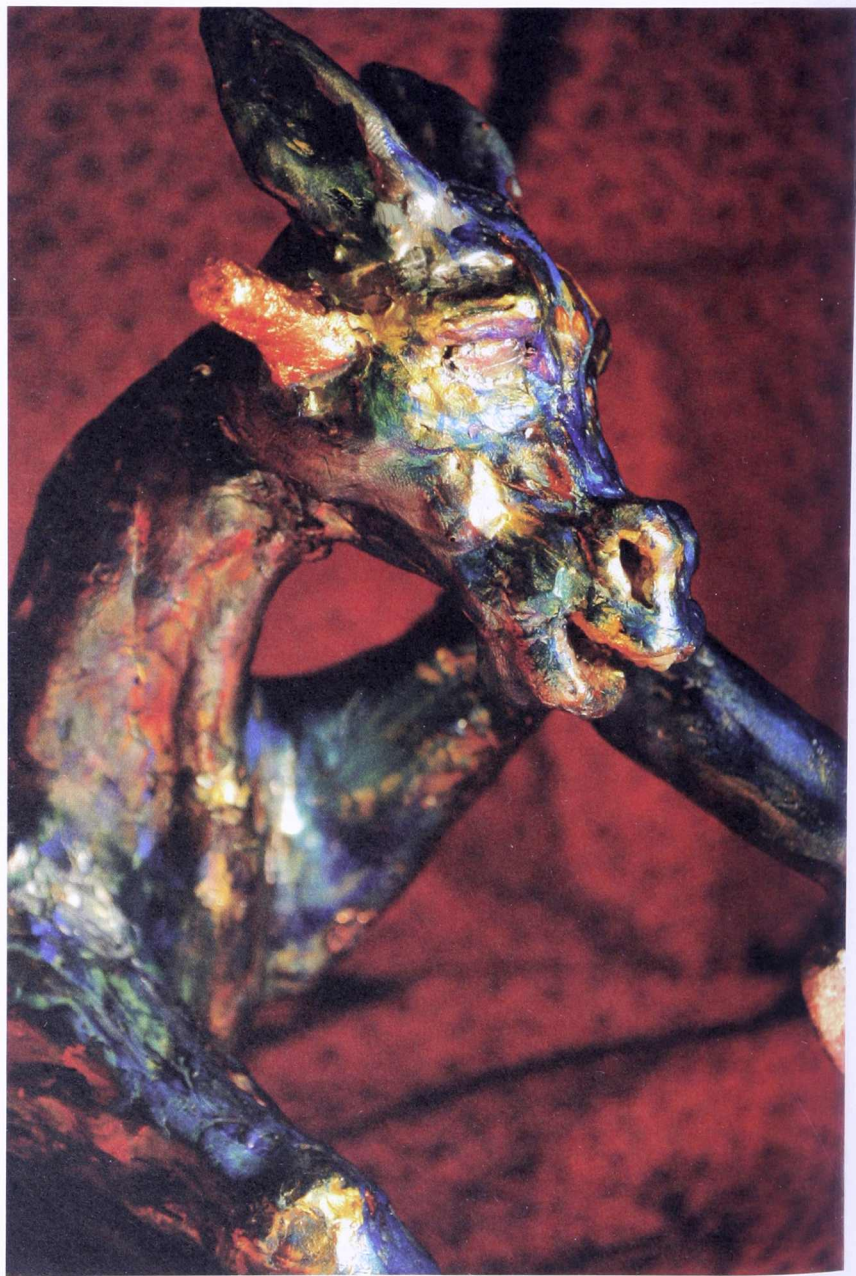
I put more water in its base about once a week, and it lives

But it doesn't grow, it simply survives

It's grey now, because of the dust all over it (like Kansas) it never moves, 'cause there's no wind, and it won't get any bigger, no matter what I try.

I'm like this plant, there are those that care for me, give me water, sun, everything, and I

just sit there alive, not much happenin' here.



Red lip rouge, luster.
This city has deep tiger slits,
dicey, with dens and hills.
It is smart to meet in quiet digs,

A shrine of silk,
no lights and soft pillows.
It is safe there.
Empty shelves and walls
no shadows, no collections, no art.

Swaying hips persuade them.

Panties lasso them.
Back arched with sweat
drip, dripping
down my spine.
They clutch my waist until I
I bruise.

And I, too, am pleased.
My eyes roll and flicker, pearl pulses
when my flame cools.

Still, there is no quiet. No silence.

Green Garrison Cap

For My Grandfather

i don't know
what you saw in the
jungles or how
you slept
with the screams of men.

i know you from
christmases spent with us,
how my dad will drive
to tennessee each year to pick
you up. how those christmas
mornings you stand off to the side,
laughing and coughing
as we open presents.

i remember that
one christmas eve when your
deep cough scared me.

i thought you were dying,
my mom said it was normal
for a man of eighty still smoking.

you gave me your
green garrison cap
when i was a boy.

pinned to the fabric:
a faded bronze
star.

now, you give me money
for college and i see you
once a year.

i held the star and cap
briefly some nights ago,

and thought of you
and how you play
the trumpet during
funerals for dead veterans.

and when you die,
i'll look at the cap
and wonder how you
earned it.

on my way down
the block, i bump into
a fat man with a minute
umbrella. a very large
man with a very small
umbrella
in a very wet, slippery
street. he's a rounder
boulder than i
and i laugh,
though not so certain
why
at the time—
till i reach the cemetery
where all of our family
gathers in rows of
black, our friends 'neath
umbrellas in back.
then each priest starts
his duel, one from each faith,
over who knows the way
into heaven. who knows the
Why, and the why
our baby boy died
before his time. then
i remember the fat man,
his tiny umbrella:
hair dry, shoulders
damp, feet like
two mops,
and i know then
that cover is cover.
sometimes it's
enough to do
what we can,
to stand with
a tiny umbrella.



An Insignificant Plot

She spoke quickly, almost stuttering. "I hand-wrote it out at work. If you could just read it and type it up."

She pulled up a chair from the kitchen table and sat anxiously beside me at the desk to watch as I keyed in her words. "This is actually pretty good, babe."

"Will she like it, do ya think?"

"It's honest, conversational, and most of all, honest. It's you."

She nibbled at a French manicured nail, then on her thumb cuticle, worrying about the essay's reception in Freshman Composition. She was especially nervous for being a high school senior on a college campus, even if it was a technical college.

"But it isn't anything special. I mean, like I don't use big words or anything."

Her essay was about commitment and loss. It was the story of a young girl, herself, who by hard work and determination had made the varsity cheerleading squad in her freshman year of high school. That's a big deal to young blondes at county high schools, especially when state cheerleading championships are commemorated by green sheet metal signs erected along side the major thoroughfares into the county. I'd seen the sign long before I met her.

"I was a good writer in high school," she insisted.

"And you're still a good writer. You just gotta be yourself. Write the way you speak."

Poor girl. Broke her ankle halfway through the season. The whole competition routine had to be changed to absorb the loss. The team turned against her immediately; she was ostracized, suddenly toppled from her pedestal as a social success and cast into isolation. But she didn't quit the cheerleading team.

She cried when the announcement was made. Sitting on the bench, clutching her crutches in desperate expectation, she cried when her teammates were named state champions. She just sat on the bench and cried. She was so happy.

And she was happy when her grade came back for that personal essay. She received an A. But she wasn't as happy about the A, she said, as she was about being on the state champ cheer squad.

I loved her. I loved her green eyes, her soft skin, and her unending exuberance. She was given to bouts of extreme emotions: one minute excited and another doubled up in tears over some minor disturbance.

She had wanted a puppy for so long. Just a little puppy, maybe a toy yorkie or a chihuahua. A friend of hers from high school had a little dog and would dress it up in sweaters, tie its hair up in bows. She didn't have plans to buy a dog that day, but when she saw the chihuahua puppies the lady was selling in the mall parking lot, she couldn't help herself.

When she brought the dog home, her mother called her an idiot. At least, that's all that I was told. Cathy came to my house, the little dog in a pink shirt and

Cathy with raccoon eyes from her running mascara. I didn't ask any more about it, though she usually shrugged off that sort of maternal reprobation with an under-the-breath "bitch." The dog peed on my comforter as I tried to console her. I said it was ok. Puppies don't know any better.

I put the dog in the garage as she fixed up her makeup, and then we drove to Wal-Mart. As we passed the frozen foods case she decided that making a pizza would heal everything.

She would bring her little Chihuahua puppy to my house after work and we would watch movies and play with the dog. Sometimes, when she wanted, I would walk across the street to the gas station where I worked and buy a six pack of beer for myself and a bottle of Arbor Mist for her. Maybe we'd smoke pot in the back yard, our feet playing in the cool pool water, and make up stories about people we didn't like at work. We would hush each other in bed so that my parents wouldn't hear us. She thought that "doing it" in the finished attic room was weird, and that me going down on her was gross. She didn't like to go down on me because she didn't believe she was any good at it.

When she moved to Athens to follow her football star from high school, I still loved her. The first few times she came back to the county to visit her mom she stayed with me. My dad would smile. Little cute cheerleader type with a chest; he was proud. Mom would say something cordial, like "well hey, Cathy, it's good to see you again. How is Athens treating you?" and then go to her room and watch old film adaptations of Jane Austen novels.

I remember coming home with her from town one afternoon, before she moved to Athens, when we still saw each other most days. We joined my parents in the living room where they were watching TV to just chat, make some face time. My dad turned the volume down to allow space for conversation, and we began the usual "and this happened at work and school" and "I heard about that storm on the radio in Missouri, how terrible and sad." Cathy zoned out, fixated by the figure on the TV screen. "I've seen him before. Who is he?" she asked.

Neither of my parents could respond. They just looked at her, at me, at each other. Blinked. I chimed in quick, almost fast enough to cut the awkwardness. "Baby, that's Adolf Hitler. He's the one who killed the Jews in the Holocaust."

Nothing else you can say when things like that happen. After that my mom always said, "I like Cathy, but she just isn't your type. Sweet girl, but..."

"Oh, Martha," Dad would interrupt, "sometimes we don't date girls for their brains."

I loved Cathy's brain best of all. I'd never met anyone like her. At least, I'd never grown so close to someone like her. She read Nicholas Sparks

and *Twilight*; they were her Thomas Wolfe and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. In the car, without breaking her conversational stride, she would switch from my Thelonius Monk CD to the radio to listen to Kesha. I only objected once, and she explained, "I can't talk when I have to think to understand the music."

We met a few nights before Christmas, after her last semester of high school. I was working the all-night shift at the only 24-hour gas station within twenty miles, and she was on her way in town to Wal-Mart with some boy in a County High track sweater. Cathy and I chatted briefly at the counter as she paid for her coffee and the boy's soda. She came in three more times that same night, but the boy was content with the soda. He stayed in the car thereafter. Never saw him again. Cathy and I stopped seeing each other in late April.

In June, after she had stopped staying with me during her visits, her puppy died while she was in town visiting her mother. My brother said I should offer to dig the grave, so I went over with a shovel and post-hole digger and carved out a three foot hole in the hard-packed clay beside her mother's double wide trailer. Cathy cried, just kept repeating: "She was such a good dog."

As I dug, Cathy's mother asked her to come inside to fix me a glass of water. Cathy's mother came out alone a few minutes later, offered me a glass of water and smiled.

Cathy soon came back out, her raccoon eyes gone and now with glimmering lips, and played with her stepsister in the yard as I kept digging. Her mother stood beside the hole and tried to make conversation. Asked about school. I wasn't enrolled. Asked about work. They'd fired me over a drug test. I hollered at Cathy, "Alright, it's deep enough."

Cathy took the shoebox in which the vet packed the dog from the bed of her step-dad's truck and, with all the solemnity she could muster, held the shoebox in front of her and marched toward the crab grass plot.

"I just want to see her one more time," she said. I nodded.

This was too much for her. She could only get one corner lifted before her eyes welled-up again. As she pressed the box in her mother's hands, she buried her face in my chest. Mascara sullied my Grateful Dead t-shirt as she sobbed. She smelled of Dolce and Gabbana. "It's okay, baby. You gave her a good life."

We slept together that night before she returned to Athens. Haven't slept with her since. I would, but all she wants from me now is to talk about her problems. So I answer her phone calls and give her fifteen minutes.

She has literary ambitions. She wants to write a book, a sort of guidebook for her little stepsister. She wants to warn young girls about the dangers of life. That is, she wants to warn them of all the many mistakes, as she calls them, that she has made over the years. Sounds like a good idea, especially if she's as honest in that book as she was in her first college essay.

Subject: How We're Doing

Dear Aunt M,

I didn't know you. I mean, I knew your face and name and that you were Mama's sister and you knew my face and name and that I was her grandson, but there wasn't anything past that. I don't know if you ever found out about how you died. It was on the news.

It was your husband, G. I don't know why he did it, but the same string broke in him that broke in an unusual amount of men in that side of the family. One day, while you were in bed with your emphysema and Alzheimer's, he scooped you up in his arms and carried you outside into the summer evening and laid you on the dark, warm lawn. Then he shot you. I don't know why. I know that for more than fifty years he loved you more than anybody loved anything. So, it wasn't the real him that did it. But, he shot you. Then he shot little J, y'all's nine year old grandson. He was running and screaming like he does and G shot him.

After G had done things, he sat down in a lawn chair beside where you were laying and shot himself in the heart. He dropped the gun and followed.

What most people still here said at the funerals was that the worst part was that your daughter, D, saw it all. That's how I know these things. She told S who told Mama who told my mother who told me while I drove her down to Norcross so she wouldn't be alone that night.

I watched a reporter on TV stand in your front yard while I ate leftover spaghetti.

I'm sorry you were killed. I don't know why it happened. I hope that in death you can breathe easily and that your short term memory has returned. And I hope you're with G and that you can both see through the frail, mortal misery that rotted out his heart for that one moment. The way Mama talks about you I know you couldn't resent him.

You're buried near R, who I called Granddaddy. If he's there with you when you get this e-mail, please, tell him I love him. And that his wife, who I call Mama, didn't break when he left. Tell him what he already knows, how strong she is, and that we all look up to her; that when she dies it'll be us that break.

With love, your grandnephew,
Joshua

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